

BHIM SINGH

A Romance of Mughal Times

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DEDICATED
BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION
TO
HIS HIGHNESS MAHARAJA
SRI KRISHNARAJA WADIYAR BAHADUR
OF MYSORE, G O S I., G B E

PREFACE

WHOEVER attempts a romance on a Rajput theme in Mughal times must acknowledge his indebtedness to Tod's monumental work on Rajasthan and to Bernier's *Travels*. From Colonel Tod's book I have taken, with some minor omissions, the splendid letter sent by the Rana of Mewar to Aurangzeb. Tod gives this letter as translated from the Persian original by Sir W B Rouse. It is not for me here to dispute the authorship of the original letter. In an old translation of some Persian *Memoirs of Delhi and Ferozabad* by William Hoey I found the letter sent by Aurangzeb to entrap his son Muhammad Akbar. I have added to it one parenthetical clause.

Historically considered, the theme of the book is the discomfiture of Aurangzeb in the Rajput War. I have followed the course of events closely, but have naturally enough taken such liberties as are permissible to a romancer. For example, I have made the rescue of God Krishna from Muttra take place several years later than it really did, and have pictured a different route as taken by the rescuers from the actual one. I have also, for greater dramatic effect, imagined the deaths of Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur and of Jai Singh of Amber as falling together. My heroines, Premabai and Ambahka, are purely fictitious, so too are most of the episodes in which the hero Bhim Singh figures. The

episode of the outlaw Goculdas is pure fiction. The full account of the battle of the Bersach is also fiction, based, however, on the bare statement that Aurangzeb himself was utterly routed somewhere thereabouts in Udaipur territory. I have also taken liberties with the location of the Peacock Throne. All the fictitious episodes, nevertheless, are quite in keeping with Rajput history and character as recorded in the chronicles.

My hero Bham Singh is a very shadowy figure in the chronicles. About his end there are conflicting versions. One chronicle says that he was killed at Nadol, the other says that, being really the elder son but somehow in the end tricked out of his inheritance, he resolved to quit his country and seek his fortunes at the Emperor's Court. For his good services the Emperor made him Raja of Banera, a fief which, I believe, is still held by his descendants. There is also a statement in one chronicle that he met his death by breaking his spine during an exhibition of his special feat of swinging onto an overhanging bough from his horse as it galloped beneath. His brother, Jai Singh, has a later history as Rana from his recorded acts as Rana. I have constructed his character as a lad.

I venture to claim, therefore, that my tale is sound enough as history, and I hope my readers will find it sound enough as romance.

F R S

BANGALORE, August 1925

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE BOAR HUNT - - - - -	1
II. SANCTUARY - - - - -	14
III THE FUGITIVES - - - - -	23
IV A NIGHT ATTACK - - - - -	30
V THE RANA RETURNS THANKS TO EKLINGA	38
VI A VISIT TO KELWA - - - - -	45
VII THE RANA SENDS A LETTER TO AURANGZEB	52
VIII THE EMPEROR CONSIDERS HIS REPLY -	62
IX PRINCE BHIM ESCAPES - - - - -	69
X AKBAR'S COMMISSION - - - - -	77
XI A GAME OF CHESS IS INTERRUPTED - -	87
XII RAM-RUKKI, OR THE BRACELET-BROTHER -	94
XIII THE RANA'S STAR IN THE ASCENDANT -	107
XIV TIT FOR TAT - - - - -	121
XV THE OUTLAW - - - - -	135
XVI A BID FOR A THRONE - - - - -	147
XVII SAVED BY SUBTLETY - - - - -	158
XVIII. RAJPUT HONOUR RETRIEVED - - -	171
XIX A TREATY OF PEACE - - - - -	178
XX ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL - - -	184

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	TO	PAGE
The Great Temple at Eklinga, Udaipur	-	40
Village and Fort Kelwa, Udaipur	-	48
The Banas River at Raj Mahal	-	52
The Two Palaces, Udaipur	-	88
The Fortress of Kumbhalmer from South, Udaipur		94
Map of Rajputana	-	<i>At end</i>

CHAPTER I

THE BOAR HUNT

(1) *The Gathering*

GAY and animated was the scene on the great terrace in front of the palace of the Rana of Mewar one bright spring morning. From far and near the feudal chieftains had come at the bidding of their prince to celebrate the Festival of Ahairea. A finer, more manly set of men was nowhere to be seen. Dressed in tunics and turbans of green, the customary gift of the Rana to his invited guests on this festival day, they were clustered in little groups laughing and in holiday mood without any distinction of rank or degree. On such occasions, indeed, the chieftains of the lowest rank were considered as worthy of honour as even the 'great ancient' of Mewar, the chief Rutten of Salumbar, head of the famous Chondawat clan who had the privilege of leading the van in battle. In one little group were to be seen the Saktawat chiefs, Mokham and Gunga, merrily jesting with the chieftains of Bedla and Bijolh. Near to them the aged chief of Bhainsror was in earnest converse with Thakur Gopinath of Ghanerao, the chief town in the province of Godwar on the western side of the Aravallis. The latter was a remarkable-looking man of middle age, whose short black beard and moustache

were already flecked with grey To this redoubtable warrior was committed the keeping of the Pass of Kumbhalmer, guarded by the strongest fortress in the whole mountain range of the Aravallis Not many months were destined to pass before he was to experience to the full the weight of this most responsible post and nobly to discharge his duty

Cantering up to them on his horse 'The Thunderbolt' came a lad of sixteen, Prince Bhim Singh, the Rana's second son He greeted them right merrily, for he was in high spirits It was the first time he was to join in this dangerous sport of hunting the wild boar He was burning with eagerness to show himself a true Rajput and to have his name celebrated by the bard for skill and daring He carried a spear in his right hand, in his belt was a heavy javelin about a foot long, quite unlike the short daggers carried by many of his companions, but he had no sword This curious javelin was remarked upon by Thakur Gopinath, and the Prince explained that he had long been practising the art of throwing it, indeed he asserted without any air of boastful exaggeration that he could split a young bamboo at twenty paces distant The Rawat of Bhansror looked incredulous, little knowing that his assertion was no idle boast and that the young Prince's skill with this unusual weapon was to be the means of saving the life of Thakur Gopinath on this memorable day—the last Ahairea to be celebrated in Mewar for some years to come Alas! other foes to the Goddess of Harvest than the wild boar were soon to be ravaging the smiling crops

The kettle-drums sounded from within the front courtyard of the palace All eyes were turned to the arched entrance, all tongues were hushed, and the chief-

tains ranged themselves in line with eager expectancy. The Rana had mounted his spirited grey horse, famous throughout Rajasthan for its speed, and was seen slowly advancing. He was followed by his heir-apparent, Jai Singh, upon another grey horse, which the Prince secretly maintained was more than a match for his father's horse 'The Arrow'. Both were dressed in green, the hunter's garb. There was, indeed, nothing about their dress or equipment to distinguish them from the ordinary chieftain. The Rana, who was but first among his peers, graciously acknowledged the salutations with which he was received.

Raj Singh, Rana of Mewar, was now in the twenty-fifth year of his reign. The years of his rule had been marked by a very severe famine, the dire effects of which had caused him to think of some enduring remedy against such evils. He had planned and carried to completion the magnificent *Rajsamund* by raising a wonderful marble dam across a mountain valley to irrigate the tableland below. Thoughtful, courteous and gracious, he yet lacked nothing of the energy and martial vigour of his ancestors and left a name as glorious as any in the annals of Mewar.

The Rana, with the Rawat of Salumbar, whose hereditary privilege it was to be next his sovereign, led the way across the terrace, followed by Prince Jai Singh. Breaking away from the group of chieftains, with whom he had just been conversing, Bhim Singh joined his brother. They wished each other the best of luck in this their first boar-hunt. The two princes were of an age—born, indeed, of different mothers on the same day and at the same hour. Though unlike in many ways, they were united by a warm affection. Jai Singh was

the son of the Rana's favourite wife Rangadevi, Princess of Rupnagar, a junior branch of the famous Rajput House of Marwar, whom he had won by a bold coup. The Emperor Aurangzeb had had in mind to follow the example of his predecessors and marry a Rajput princess. Rangadevi had been the lady of his choice. Little did he dream that the lady he chose would not only reject with disdain the proffered alliance but would even prefer self-destruction. She had entrusted her cause to the strong arm of the chief of the Rajput race, offering herself as the reward of protection. 'Was the swan,' she wrote to him, 'to be the mate of the stork, a Rajputni, pure in blood, to be the wife of the monkey-faced barbarian!' The Rana had answered the appeal and boldly rescued her from the imperial escort which Aurangzeb had sent to fetch his bride.

But the spirit of Rangadevi had not descended to her son. Jai Singh, short in stature and thick-set in build, was inclined to be rather inactive. He had attained only a moderate degree of proficiency in most of the sports and martial exercises of the Rajput noble, but he was a splendid rider. He preferred his flute playing to all other pursuits, and was in truth no mean performer. He was for this reason very acceptable to the ladies, for whose company he learnt to have an undue preference. Had a stranger been asked which of the two was the son of Rangadevi he would without hesitation have pointed to Bhim Singh. Taller than his brother by many inches, he was lithe and sinewy. No one could do such gymnastic feats as he, vaulting and leaping, swinging on the boughs of trees with almost as much ease and skill as the monkeys themselves. He was an excellent horseman, proficient with bow and arrow,

with javelin and spear, and learning to master the long heavy cut-and-thrust sword. He was patient and persevering in learning these arts though inclined in all else to be somewhat rash and impetuous.

Slowly the gay cavalcade wended its way beneath the Triple Gate, following the Rana by twos and threes. From behind the screens and the balconies of the palace the queens, their children and attendants and the wives and daughters of many of the chieftains, were watching with interest and discussing with animation the various chiefs as they rode along. Conscious of bright eyes looking down upon them, some of the riders made their steeds curvet and prance about to show off their own skill and tossed their spears high aloft. Many were the conjectures amongst the ladies whose sword or whose spear would reap the richest harvest, many the anecdotes of former prowess. Whilst their elders were thus engaged, the children, fascinated by the pretty sight below them, were eagerly pointing out to one another whatever attracted their attention for the moment, and laughing merrily at the prancing steeds that would have thrown less experienced horsemen and the tossing spears that threatened so often to fall on the riders' heads.

Behind the eager group of children, at the further end of the balcony, Premabai, daughter of Thakur Gopmath of Ghanerao, was standing mutely drinking in the scene before her, and vaguely wishing that Prince Bhim had been one of the last to disappear from sight. She had watched him talking to her father and admired his fine features and the easy grace of his every movement. She had seen his frankly cordial greeting to his brother. The only child of her father, and for many years motherless, she often felt lonely and yearned for some companions.

of her own age and rank Bhim Singh, she thought, would have made an ideal brother. Their tastes would have been so similar. For the Thakur of Ghanerao had taught his daughter to ride, to shoot and to swim. He had brought her up indeed as a son, and had frequently applauded her skill with the bow, saying that the bow must be her weapon but that the sword and lance were beyond her strength. Premabai had acquiesced, and beyond handling sword and lance and learning the feel of them she had not practised their use. It must not be thought that she was of a masterful mannish type, for this was not the case. Though she accompanied her father everywhere, even sometimes in petty skirmishes, learning to endure the sight of blood and wounds, she still retained the best of a woman's nature. Piety was a marked feature of her character, her best friend was a learned Sanyasi who, with her father's approval, instructed her in Vedic lore. Though, when dressed as a boy, she might have passed anywhere for a nobleman's son, she appeared at her best in girlish attire. Her figure was slim and straight and supple, her face a fine oval shape with lustrous brown eyes, a straight rather aquiline nose, cheeks of the freshest bloom, lips of the rosiest red, and a well-rounded chin showing firmness and determination of character. When she removed her scarf there could be seen short tresses glossier than the raven's wing.

(2) *The Hunt*

The Rana led the way down the gentle slope from his palace to the margin of the lake. Then putting their horses to an easy canter, and spreading out more or less into line, the whole party skirted the northern side of

the wide bay which Lake Pichola makes at this point Swords flashed in the air as some of the chieftains, bending low over their saddle-bows, made cuts at an imaginary boar. Every now and then a cavalier would gallop forward with his spear held upright until he saw some suitable mark—then down would come his unerring spear to strike the chosen object. These preliminaries were in order to practise their eye—for the wild boar is a ruthless foe not to be missed with impunity.

Then, leaving the lake, they diverged at an angle in a north-westerly direction, making for the wilder, more broken country amidst the foothills. Thus they reached after a ride of some six or seven miles. It was rough going for the horses, and yet their riders seemed to take no note but let their well-trained steeds pick their own way. Suddenly a halt was called. With profound obeisances a peasant approached the Rana. He reported that the scouts had sent him back to say that they had located three or four boars in a ravine, where they were hidden in dense scrub. This news was most welcome. Successful hunting on this Ahairea day was held to be most auspicious of prosperity and success in the coming year. The Rana was immensely pleased and gave the man a rich reward.

Following the peasant's directions, the horsemen moved off a couple of miles to the opening of the ravine and found the scouts sitting motionless on the rocky edges of both sides and at the head, waiting until the hunters were ready before they hurled down rocks to drive out the quarry.

The horsemen took up their positions in a wide semi-circle. The Rana had the post of honour in the centre, right opposite the mouth of the ravine. Jai Singh,

bristling mane and the point wedged itself firmly in a cleft of the rock. The Thakur released his hold and, as soon as possible, reined in his horse to retrieve his spear. It was useless to go on in pursuit for he carried no other weapon that day except a small dagger in his belt.

Meanwhile Blum Singh had gone thundering past and caught sight of the flying quarry as it emerged from the bushes. He was glad he had not checked Thunderbolt's speed. His first impulse had been to do so when he saw the Thakur striking. He hardly expected such an experienced hunter to miss twice. However, the fates had been kind to him, and now at last it was his turn. He would show the Thakur how to do it. But he was so excited that, when he had come within a reasonable distance, without thinking, he stood up in his stirrups and actually hurled his spear at the beast. He missed his aim, and the spear buried its head in the ground just before the boar. Perhaps it was this that made the boar swerve aside and turn in a short circle to rush once more down the track he had come. Once more Thunderbolt swung round and resumed the mad chase. The boar had a good start. It was quite a hundred yards before Thunderbolt had overhauled him. Blum Singh looked ahead, and to his horror noticed the Thakur dismounted and pulling carefully at his lance to avoid snapping it. He shouted to warn him of his imminent danger. About twenty yards short of the Thakur there was an open space free of bushes, and here Blum Singh trusted to stop the boar. Quickly drawing his heavy javelin from its leather sheath, he spurred on Thunderbolt to yet greater effort. At last his chance came, he must make sure of his quarry before the bushes hid him. Raising aloft his right arm, he hurled the javelin with all his

might and had the satisfaction of seeing it bury itself up to the hilt just behind the beast's shoulder. Over he toppled, quivered and lay still. The Thakur was warm in his praises of the Prince's skill and very sincere in his gratitude. He knew well that the Prince had saved him from death, or at all events from being badly gored.

Meanwhile in other parts of the field the sport had been fast and furious. One mighty hog had rushed out of the ravine straight down through the centre of the line of expectant riders. The Rana and his son both turned their horses at the same moment and furiously charged after it. Jai Singh had the better chance, for he was now to the left of the line of flight. Neck and neck he raced alongside The Arrow, and to his utmost satisfaction found himself outstripping the Rana. After a wild gallop for three furlongs he was several paces ahead and couched his spear for a thrust. It was highly doubtful whether he would have had the strength to kill the boar had it kept a straight course. But with its natural cunning the hog seemed to realise the nearness of the lance-head and 'jinked,' by feinting a turn to the right and then suddenly swerving across to the left almost under the nose of his pursuer's steed. Instinctively touching the left rein, the Prince saved his horse from stumbling over the beast and simultaneously thrust hard at it. The great speed at which he had been riding ensured a deadly blow. The lance was driven well home into the boar, and there it was left sticking up into the air like a flagstaff of victory. 'Bravo, Jai Singh, for a beginner that was most skilfully done,' cried his father. 'Truly your steed is speedier than mine. Your brother's is called "The Thunderbolt", hereafter yours shall be

named "The Lightning Flash" It is, my son, a most happy augury for the future Well done, indeed! The Prince's pleasure at these warm words of praise was beyond measure

The chiefs on the other wing of the semicircle also enjoyed good sport The remaining boars had charged right in amongst them and had been hotly chased by forty or fifty horsemen shouting in exultation With so many pursuers the animals had little chance of escape One hog had soon been despatched by a sword-thrust from the Bedla chieftain, but the other, a bigger and stronger beast than his ill-fated companion, by making skilful use of all the natural cover and dodging this way and that, had eluded his pursuers for nearly a mile He was seen to be making a wide sweep to the right, evidently hoping to reach the sanctuary of the ravine from which he had been so unceremoniously driven out Suddenly he disappeared When the pursuit came up to the spot where the earth had apparently swallowed him up, they found themselves on the edge of a deep nullah whose sides were too precipitous and whose bed was too rocky for even a Rajput to take his horse into It was a matter for some discussion whether the beast could possibly have escaped breaking its limbs by such a leap Concluding that there was a bare chance that the bushes had broken its fall, the party divided to block up either exit, some to the left and some, the more experienced hunters, to the right, that being nearest to the ravine The boar, meanwhile, rudely shaken but otherwise uninjured, was squatting beneath an overhanging rock gaining its second wind There it would have stayed all day had not the beaters come up and, throwing down flaming torches, set fire to the brush-

little expected the honour, for he had done nothing worthy of note that day. With the cup he had sent the watchword 'Remember Kumbhalmer.' The Thakur gracefully acknowledged the compliment. When the bard had rehearsed the glorious exploits of the day in his improvised stanzas, and had called to mind the gallant deeds of the Rana's ancestors, the banquet ended. As the setting sun flushed the mountain peaks with a delicate rosy hue they mounted again and took their homeward way.

CHAPTER II

SANCTUARY

(1) *The Message*

THE merry month of Phalgun that had been ushered in with the Ahairea had drawn to its close. The riotous mirth had been, if anything, more lively than usual, as if to compensate for the two years to come when the sterner realities of war were to drive all other thoughts out of men's minds. Groups of people had continually patrolled the streets, throwing crimson powder at one another with shouts of laughter and ribald jests. The chieftains, all of them who had cared to join in the fun, had played the game of *holi* on the grand terrace in front of the palace. A brilliant sight it had been to see them, with the most graceful and dexterous horsemanship, darting at one another, pursuing, curveting and jesting when their missiles, formed of thin plates of mica enclosing the crimson powder, hit their mark. On the last day of the festival the big kettle-drums at the Triple Gate had summoned all the chiefs with their retainers to attend their prince and accompany him in procession to the *Chougan* or Field of War. There in the long hall, reached by a flight of marble steps, under a roof supported by square columns without any walls, the Rana, surrounded by his chiefs, had passed a pleasant hour

listening to the songs in praise of *Hohca*, and watching the buffoons and itmerant groups below mixing with the mounted retainers, throwing powder in their eyes or deluging their garments with the crimson liquid. In the evening the Rana had feasted his chiefs and had distributed cocoanuts and swords of lath painted in grotesque fashion, meant as burlesque in keeping with the character of the day when war is banished and man is bidden by the Goddess who rules the spring to multiply and not destroy. At nightfall large bonfires had been lit for the burning of the *hole*, and the orgies had risen to their height. So had Phalgun passed in the year 1679 A D.

The rejoicings in honour of Gouri in the following month were in full swing when an unexpected event occurred. The Rana, his chiefs and ministers, after having duly bowed to the Goddess on her throne close to the water's edge, were seated in their boats on the lake watching the graceful dance of the maidens before the image, and listening to their melodious hymns in honour of the Goddess of Abundance or on love and chivalry, when a written message was delivered to the Rana that instantly made him look grave and perplexed. A whispered colloquy took place with the chieftain of Salumbar and a brief message in reply was despatched. The Rana had decided that it would be unnecessary and unwise to interrupt the rites. It would be time enough that evening to take the necessary steps. After some hours of easy and good-humoured conversation, during which she was supposed to be bathing, the Goddess was taken up and conveyed to the palace in a stately procession. Before her went damsels with wands of silver, on either side two beautiful maidens waved the silver *chamra* over her head, behind her came a long line of

She had had an arduous journey across the mountains. But her fears of immediate pursuit were considerably allayed by the promise of the Thakur of Ghanerao to act as a rearguard to her small party. The Thakur had obtained permission from the Rana to depart to his estates before the Gouri fest was over. Premabai had been disappointed. She had looked forward to this great festival though she had often seen it before. Her father's word was law. She had uttered no remonstrance. Nay, indeed, when she knew that Durga Mata—the Goddess of the mountain of Kumbhalmer that was her father's special care—had appeared to him in a vision and told him to be up and doing, for danger threatened, she had been the more anxious of the two to depart. Thus it was that the Thakur and his daughter, with their retinue of five hundred men, had vowed to put an impassable barrier 'twixt the queen and her enemies. For now she had reached her that a force of unknown strength had marched from Delhi under Afzal Khan and had already passed Ajmer.

(2) *The Meeting*

At sunrise the next day the Rana had pushed on to the Banas. His royal kettle-drums announced his approach. He crossed the river and made his way to the Rani's camp. He found her sitting in front of her tent drinking in the fresh cool morning breeze and gazing across to the mountain barrier now beginning to brighten beneath the rays of the rising sun. Once more she found herself in the country of her birth—once more she felt convinced that the view of the mountains from the east was far finer than that from the west where her now

home had been for several years. She was grateful for the coolness of the morning, for she had passed a restless night of feverish anxiety and looked worn and haggard.

'Welcome to Mewar, fair cousin,' said the Rana in gentle tones. 'I am right glad to see thee, though, if rumour speak true, the occasion of thy coming is sorrowful. But I see thou art weary and sad. This is not the time nor this the place to rehearse thy tale of woe. Let us hasten back to the palace in which thou didst spend many happy hours of thy girlhood. My queens will welcome thee with open arms. When thou art rested and refreshed I will hear thy story.'

Korumdev, who had risen to greet him, bowed her acquiescence. Orders were given to strike camp. The queen with her babe and her female attendants in palkis were soon ferried over the river, and the party proceeded by easy stages and frequent halts towards 'the city of the rising sun'. The whole of the Emperor's black trenchery was soon told to the Rana's chieftains by the Rahtor escort. Fierce and deep was their wrath, but they restrained the expression of it, for they knew full well that their noble and fearless prince would soon give them opportunities to speak their passionate thoughts in the language of sword and lance. Late in the evening of the second day they reached the city.

In a spacious room on the upper floor of the palace two queens were sitting side by side on soft cushions. Through the beautiful filigree work of the marble latticed screens on the balcony the bright sun glinted and threw a chequered light upon the rich carpets within. On the walls were painted frescoes depicting the famous deeds of the Sesodias. Thus the royal children learnt the history of their race and were daily started by tales of

heroic fidelity and love of country Queen Rangadevi had her arm around the unhappy Jodhpur Rani, speaking words of comfort 'Weep thy fill, cousin, let nature take its course Hereafter the fount of tears will be dried up and thou wilt be nerved for bold revenge' 'Ah me,' said Korumdevi, in broken accents through her sobs, 'but yesterday as 'twere I was so happy, rejoicing in my good fortune and in my dear lord's affection. Alas! Alas! my pretty babe that never saw its father My little Ajit, to thee I must be both mother and father Rough and thorny is the path, but destiny wills that we tread it Never, whilst breath is in my body, shall that cruel tyrant come near thee'

These thoughts seemed to check the flow of the widow's tears, and turning to her friend she said in firm tones, 'Rangadevi, thou too art of Marwar lineage, upon thy help I count much'

'Nay, nay,' replied the other, 'in this matter all Rajputs are akin All the clans will help thee, fair cousin It is a deadly insult to the whole Rajput race. Soon shall the tyrant know what 'tis to rouse the dwellers in Rajasthan'

Lifting aside the curtain, the Rana softly entered, and paying his respects to the ladies sat down on the cushion by the side of Korumdevi Rangadevi moved a little apart 'Ay, truly,' began the Rana, 'soon shall the tyrant learn the wrath of the Rajputs. From thy Raktors, fair cousin, I have learnt much of thy sad story, 'twere well, if thou art able, for thee to rehearse the events as they fell out, that I may see to the bottom of the Emperor's new subtleties'

Then Korumdevi began in a low voice to tell her tale 'Maharana,' she said, 'know then that twenty months

ago my lord was summoned to the imperial court and bidden to bring seven thousand swords. His sovereign lord had great work for him to do—no less than to take an army into distant Afghanistan to reconquer the lost province of Kabul. With Jaswant Singh and his brave Rahtors to lead the imperial forces, he wrote, success was assured. I liked not this flattering tone, but my lord saw naught but truth in his words. My heart was filled with foreboding. Kabul was so far away beyond inaccessible mountains, fierce and cunning were the Afghans, the cold would be intense. But these fears I kept to myself. In spite of them I determined to accompany my husband. Maharana, you have heard how well my lord performed his perilous task and recaptured Kabul for his treacherous master. In my belief this news did not gladden the Emperor, who had secretly hoped for Jaswant's capture or death, he ever bore a grudge against him for aiding Dara and opposing him at Fatehabad. But he soon attained his dastardly wish. By his orders Shayista Khan, his fellow-commander and leader of the Mughal troops, invited my lord to a banquet of victory and poisoned the cup. The Musulman had always been jealous and brisely suspicious of my husband, accusing him most falsely of treachery at Poona. In my despair I desired to commit Sati, but the thought of my unborn babe and a thirst for revenge restrained me. After my little Ajit was born, as soon as I was able to travel, my intrepid clansmen brought me down from those cruel mountains. Our troubles were not yet ended. The tyrant had the effrontery to try bribing my Rahtors. He dared to offer them large territories in Marwar if they would surrender the babe. The clansmen were most indignant at this

crude attempt to tamper with their loyalty, and with great scorn rejected this base offer

'Then the monster sent forth a strong force to capture me and my infant son. To no avail. In a fierce battle, wherein there was much slaughter on both sides, we were victorious. But, whilst the issue was doubtful and the fortune of war seemed against us, I sent my innocent babe hidden in a basket of sweetmeats to a certain Muslim, a faithful friend of my lord. I myself had determined, if need arose, to kill myself sooner than be taken alive. The faithful friend carried my babe many miles and gave him over to my vassal Durgadas who was hurrying to our rescue. I doubt not that the Emperor will attack us with an overwhelming force. Therefore have I come with all speed across the mountains to claim sanctuary and protection from you. O kinsman, let us together wreak vengeance on that accursed monster. May his soul creep as a caterpillar on the floor of hell for sixty thousand years !'

These last words were uttered in a high shrill voice. The Rani's fine face in her bitter wrath was contorted into ugliness. She seemed about to burst out again into speech when the Rana gently laid his hand upon her arm and said, 'It is enough, it shall be, queen, as thou wishest. Aurangzeb has no cause to love me for snatching his intended bride, and now he shall have cause for an ocean of hatred. But I must call a council and devise measures with my chiefs for the immediate future.'

The council that evening was short. The Rana's decision met with instant approval. It was decided that the chiefs of Bednor, Deogarh, Mandal, and Banera should hasten to their fiefs, raise the feudal levies and help the Thakur of Ghanerao to chase out, or at any

rate arrest the progress of Afzal Khan and his forces marching down from Ajmer. Meanwhile a powerful contingent under Prince Bhim Singh should escort Korumdevi and her son to the stronghold of Kelwa in the Aravallis, where Ajit Singh could be under the immediate safeguard of the brave Durgadas, whilst the Rani, as occasion served, could nurse the spirit of resistance at home.

CHAPTER III

THE FUGITIVES

THERE was no time to be lost. A mounted escort of a thousand men, composed of the retainers of three chieftains who were still at the court, under their own leaders, had assembled very early on the next morning before the palace. Bhim Singh was in the palace courtyard awaiting Korumdevi and her attendants. Drawn up in line behind him was the small Rahtor escort of fifty men that were to form the Rani's immediate body-guard. Four palkis with their sturdy bearers were in readiness by the inner portal. Within a short time the Rana was seen leading the Rani of Jodhpur by the hand.

From the balcony above, the ladies of his Rawla or Zenana were watching the departure. Tender had been the farewell between the queens. Korumdevi had been much strengthened and comforted by their sympathy and encouragement. She looked a different woman. Instead of weariness and sorrow there was fire and resolution in her eyes. She felt that the tide of fortune had begun to turn. The period of vague uncertainty had passed. Now there was something definite to do, and the prospect of direct action against her foes had brought back her Rajput courage.

The Prince and the Rahtors saluted with their swords. The Rani was handed into her palanquin by the Rana, her

darling infant was placed in her lap, the Rana bowed low and the curtain dropped. Meanwhile the Rani's women had entered the other palkis. The bearers took them up and set forth at a smart pace, the escort falling into position on all sides. When the party emerged from the courtyard headed by Bhim Singh, who looked resplendent in his gold-filleted turban with its peacock plume gracefully waving backwards, the waiting escort gave a general salute. The contingent of Nimach led the way, on either flank rode the men of Bijoli, the rear was brought up by the retinue of Bedla, one of the sixteen leading nobles of Mewar. Thus the Queen of Jodhpur set forth once more on her journeying.

Her going was not so leisurely as had been her coming under the Rana's care. Above all things it was important that she should be safely lodged in the mountain stronghold of Kelwa before the advancing foe could cut off her retreat. A thousand Rajputs felt themselves a match for ten times their number, but the Rana's commands had been to spare the nerve-shaken queen the sight of bloodshed, to push on with all rapidity, to leave the Bedla feudatories as guardians of the pass, and to fall upon the flank of the foe if he should be so daring as to venture near the valley of Udaipur. In obedience to these commands the Prince pushed on apace and reached the banks of the Banas well before noon on the second day.

Within the Girwa, or circle of hills that enclosed the fertile valley of Udaipur, the Prince felt secure, and rode all the way by the side of the Rani's palki. But, when the giant portals of Debari had clanged behind them, and they had left the friendly shelter of the encircling hills, it behoved him to keep a sharp look-out. He sent

on scouts far in advance, threw out flanking parties wide on either side and kept the rear-guard within close touch. Ever and anon he would ride forward to learn if any tidings had come in, or to the rear to see they did not lag too far behind. Constant messages were coming in from the flanks to report no sign of any enemy, but that the villagers were evidently alarmed and had begun to drive in their cattle within the cactus-covered mud walls of their villages. Full of the importance of his first independent charge, Blum Singh was more restless than a leader of more experience would have been at these reports.

A 1515

Earlier in the morning in the narrow gorge of Debari a brief halt had been called. The men unsaddled their horses and allowed them to graze. A meal was served to the Rani and her women in the friendly shadows of a rock. Here a pretty scene was witnessed. The infant Prince awoke and was kicking and crowing in the prettiest manner on his mother's lap. Gradually the men of the escort in her immediate vicinity, stimulated by curiosity, edged nearer. Observing this, the Rani arose and held up her darling Ajit high for all to see. One by one, these stalwart bearded warriors came up, salaamed deeply, exclaiming in harsh but tender tones 'Ajit Ki Jai'. They vowed that they would fight for his cause to the last drop of blood in their veins. The royal infant kicked and crowed his acknowledgment. The men were delighted and said that his father's vigour had descended to his son.

Their journey had been rapid over the wide plain beyond the pass. Here Blum Singh had strengthened his flanking party on the right, with orders to search the woods well and to gather all information possible from

the many large villages that lay scattered to the eastward. They had crossed the Berach river rapidly, for the advance-guard had made all preparations at the ferry, and now they found themselves compelled to go slower, for they had come to a more broken country. Irregular low hog-backed ridges, the crests of which had a vein of quartz piercing the slate, retarded them. However, with the frequent relays of paliki-bearers, they did not lose as much pace as had been feared.

Two hours before noon, therefore, on the second day found them ascending a ridge about four hundred feet in height, a mile and a half east of the hamlet of Siarh in the fief of Delwara. The summit was a small tableland with two small lakes and many shady trees. The chieftain of Delwara had ordered his tents to be placed at the disposal of the Prince. Bhim Singh's first thought was to pitch them where they stood, for the ridge seemed likely to prove an excellent rampart against attack. His keen eye took in all the details of the spot, and the knowledge thus gained was, before long, to help him in a daring but extremely hazardous exploit, the rescue of an imperilled dety. He judged it wiser, however, to cross to the left bank of the Banas and have no more obstacles between him and his objective. Certainly the spot would give them a better camping ground than they had had the previous night, but the well-wooded banks of the river, though less breezy, would not be unsuitable for a temporary camp, for he was determined to set forth again later in the afternoon. Accordingly he gave the order to cross.

As they were enjoying the mid-day siesta, a horseman came dashing in with the tidings that a party of fugitives with three elephants and sixty horse was rapidly drawing

near accompanied by some of the advance-guard. In a moment the camp was astir, though many found it difficult to rouse themselves after their wonted indulgence in opium.

Very soon the fugitives were seen. Prince Bhim rode out to meet them. Then, under the peepul tree in the midst of the camp, the leading elephant was made to kneel whilst the Prince assisted two veiled women to descend from the howdah. He escorted them to the Rani's tent. Their coming on elephants showed that they were persons of importance, and the small 'pan-chranga,' the five-coloured ensign carried by the leader of the escort, proved them to be Kachhwahas of Jaipur. Not many minutes elapsed before he was summoned to attend the Rani. In a tent set apart for dining he found the Rani and the two strangers. One of them, an old woman, was obviously but an attendant upon the other, a girl of fifteen, whose shyness was apparent, as she took a quick furtive glance at the Prince before bending her eyes to the ground. The Prince bowed to the Rani and then to the girl, who seemed too covered with confusion to respond. Though responsibility made him look graver than usual, yet at all times he was a young man to attract feminine admiration.

The Rani held in her hand an open letter. There were tears in her eyes as she handed it over to the Prince to read. On his beardless face it was easy to see the varied emotions of astonishment, anger and grief as they came and went. He glanced often at the girl as he read the letter, and found his pity for her forlorn condition warming into love for her beauty.

Princess Ambahka of Amber was small but exquisitely proportioned. Her face still had the delicate flower-like

beauty of a child, with its rich golden olive complexion and sweet regular features. Her eyes were large and soft, of that clear dark brown that betokens love and fidelity. Her glossy tresses, straying from beneath her richly embroidered scarf, fell upon the shapely neck upon which her small head was most delicately poised. Here was beauty's self. No wonder, then, that the Prince glanced often at her and longed to hear the music of her voice, but as Ambalika had never before left the seclusion of the palace she was now shy and frightened.

At the Ram's request, the Prince read the letter aloud, slowly, as though to realise the full import of every sentence.

'Maharani,' it said, 'may all the blessings of Sri Krishna wait upon you, and may Siva, Lord of Heaven, destroy your foes. Great sorrow, alas! has befallen Amber. Jai Singh, my lord, has been treacherously done to death in the distant Deccan—poisoned, even as was yours, by the order of the monster of Delhi. My lord was ever careless of his food and drink. When you read this I shall have mounted the pyre to join my beloved in Indra's heaven. Had I a son I should have lived for his sake. But now I depart and commit my daughter to your keeping to nurture her as your own, and when the troublous times have passed to wed her to some noble lord. The daughter of the Kachhwahas comes not empty-handed. Jewels and costly robes I send with her against her wedding day. Let your arm be strengthened for a double vengeance. Farewell.

JODHBAL, the heartbroken.'

Whilst all this had been going on, a lad had been standing at the tent door awaiting permission to enter.

Across his shoulders he carried a bow and a quiver full of arrows, other weapons he had none. Not a detail of the scene before him had escaped his sharp eye. That Bhim Singh had fallen in love with Ambalika was clear beyond all doubt. He gave an involuntary sigh.

When the Prince had finished he looked up and beckoned the lad to enter. He came in with a soldierly salute and placed a short note in the Prince's hand bearing Ghanerao's seal. The Prince was startled at its contents. He told the Ram that bad news had come, necessitating immediate action, and requested her to prepare for instant departure whilst he conferred with the leaders.

CHAPTER IV

A NIGHT ATTACK

GLANCING keenly at the lad as if in surprise, Bhim Singh bade him follow, and summoned the three chieftains to a conference. The Thakur's note had been but a couple of lines to say that Afzal Khan with a force of five or six thousand men, with every prospect of immediate reinforcement, was bearing rapidly down towards the Banas. The note concluded that the messenger, his daughter Premabai, would tell all the details.

To Premabai's tale they listened very attentively, without a word of comment.

'Prince,' she began, 'my father had gathered a few levies, and with nine hundred men we rode towards the Kotari river to hinder Afzal Khan as best we could. There from fleeing villagers we learnt that he had suffered a severe check in a narrow pass near Asind. It seems that two hundred and fifty heroic Kachhwahas held the passage for two days and two nights against five thousand. They had donned their saffron robes, as a clear signal to the Musulman that they would give and take no quarter. Thus did they sacrifice their lives for the safety of their Princess. Moreover, the wild bowmen from the hills brought news that Dilr Khan, after a brief crossing of swords with Durgadas in Marwar territory, was retreating towards Ajmer. Matters then lie thus

Dilir Khan has evidently discovered that his "bird is flown," and is hoping to join his five thousand men to Afzal Khan's forces and, together taking the Soudras by surprise, to capture the Jodhpur Rani and the children. They hope to swoop down and be off before our levies are ready. My father is harassing them, but they are in great force.

Bhim Singh looked anxious. He would have relished a fight against odds had he been unencumbered. He looked at the chiefs in some perplexity. They were busy turning over plans in their heads. Before, however, any one of them could speak, Premabhai said hesitatingly, 'Prince, if a girl may presume to advise warriors, I have a plan that promises success. Let the Rani and the children and women servants be taken up on the elephants and sent along this bank of the Banas towards the hills under shelter of the woods. Meanwhile let the pikas be carried over the river to the high ridge yonder with seven hundred men—let them be seen by the enemy scouts to be moving onto the plains leading to the Dehri Pass. They will of a surety be pursued. At six miles' distance is, as you know, a deep ravine in which we can hide. We can twist and turn around the ridge, and so elude them while their attention is diverted by sharp attacks by small bodies from either flank. They

plan to adopt With one accord the chieftains agreed that it was so, and remarked that it had not been for naught that the Thakur had taken his daughter with him on his expeditions The Prince, too, warmly complimented Premabai, who blushed with pleasure in a most unsoldierlike manner

Ambalika and the Rani, her son and their attendants, were quickly mounted on the elephants and moved rapidly away down the river bank under cover of the woods, accompanied by the Rahtor body-guard and three hundred men under the Bedla chieftain, to reach their destination by a circuitous and more difficult route For some time Bhim Singh stood in a reverie gazing after them A touch on his arm awoke him from his day-dream Premabai urged haste 'Thou art right, fair maiden,' humbly confessed the Prince 'I am not wont to be so slow, but I know not what has come over me' Premabai knew well enough, but wisely kept the knowledge to herself

The river was quickly recrossed The plan had been explained to all The palka-bearers moved rapidly with their empty burdens Soon they were on the high ridge, moving eastwards along its crest till they should be observed by the enemy scouts Far off the figure of a solitary horseman was seen outlined against the sky But only for a moment It was sufficient, they had been seen Descending the ridge, they changed course slightly to the south, whilst the Bijoli contingent rode eastwards to guard their flank and if possible to let the enemy pass between them and the main body The plan succeeded beyond expectation A strong force was soon rapidly bearing down upon them But not so rapidly as they wished with their quarry seemingly so near

Again and again they were furiously charged on either side by the men of Bijoli and of Nimach. These attacks were meant more as feints than as life-and-death struggles, for the proposed night attack promised more overwhelming success. Consequently, though there was loss on both sides it was inconsiderable. Meanwhile Bhim Singh, who knew the lie of the land, took his men in and out between the ridges, heading all the time towards the ravine that was to hide them. Darkness was rapidly falling. Fortunately there was to be no moon that night.

About two miles from the ravine the palkis were abandoned in the scrub. The flank attacks had ceased, and the contingents were working their way round towards the rendezvous. An impossible task for men who did not know every inch of the way.

It was not without circumspection that Afzal Khan and his men swooped down upon the palkis, for they feared an ambush. It was necessary to make sure that they were in fact empty. The courage of Rajput women was well known to them. In the gathering darkness they had lost touch with the pursued. Afzal Khan determined to bivouac and to scour the country the next morning. He knew that reinforcements were following him, under the intrepid soldier Dilir Khan. He did not guess that the feudal levies would so soon be on the war path. In any case, rapidity and dash were essential to success. The force in front of him and the forces that had worried him, he knew, were small. They could be brushed aside like mosquitoes. His horses were tired and his men needed a good rest. He gave the order to bivouac near some fine trees.

Soon the fires were lit and the wearied Muslims had a

welcome meal. The horses were picketed, watered and fed. A picket guard was set. For a short time there was to be heard an occasional laugh and a ribald jest at the expense of these infidels who could run as fast as the wild boar they hunted. The careless jesters did not remember the cunning ways of these wild boars of which they mockingly spoke. They did not recall to mind the courage and furious onset of the animal when at bay. Nor did they for a moment dream that their jest would be so dramatically turned against them. The fires were stoked up and the men turned in to get a much-needed sleep.

Meanwhile in the ravine, now filled with the whole of the forces under Bhim Singh's command, an animated discussion was going on as to who should venture into the enemy's bivouac and stampede the horses.

'Mine was the plan,' eagerly urged Premabai, 'and mine should be the execution of it.'

'Nay,' replied the Prince, 'tis too hazardous for thee. What will thy father say if thou art lost? Seven hundred warriors to hold back whilst a girl risked her very life! 'Tis unthinkable!'

'Consider, my Prince,' quickly rejoined the Thakur's daughter, 'the hazard is but small. Who can crawl through the grass like a snake as I can? Your warriors, born to the saddle, are clumsy on their feet, nor have they the knowledge and skill in woodcraft that years of practice in the mountains have given me. If the enemy is aroused too soon our plan will go awry. I shall not expose myself to any risk.'

Still the Prince was not convinced. The fact was he longed to go himself. It was pointed out to him that his place was at the head of the attacking troops.

Finally it was decided that the honour should be given to Premabai, but that, for her better safety, one soldier should accompany her and do what killing might be necessary

Arming herself with a sharp knife and accompanied by a stalwart Rajput, Premabai set out on foot into the darkness towards the flicker of the bivouac fires. The horsemen were to follow after a short interval and take up positions as noiselessly as possible on two sides of the enemy, not too near lest their presence might be detected. They were to judge by the sounds of confusion in the bivouac when their time had come to charge. The Prince comforted himself with the thought that, whether the horses were stampeded or not, he would swoop down upon the camp and run the risk of arousing their outlying pickets and thus meeting with a determined opposition. Darkness and surprise at all events would be in his favour. He judged that three-quarters of a mile would suffice for them to keep clear of the outposts. Accordingly, as arranged, they took up their positions in silence.

Guiding themselves by the light of the distant fires, Premabai and her companion moved stealthily through the line of pickets. More than once they were challenged. Nothing could be seen, and the sentries, straining their eyes through the darkness, concluded it was some solitary jackal on the prowl or wild pig roaming about to root out the crops. In fact once, when they had crawled too near an outpost, Premabai had saved herself by uttering the peculiar bark of a jackal. She narrowly escaped the large stone that was heaved in the direction of the sound, but cunningly confirmed the sentry's notion by yelping as if in pain.

Judging from the occasional stamping of hoofs that they could hear, they guessed that the horses were picketed on the further side of the bivouac under the trees. Working their way round on their stomachs, gliding like snakes through the grass, Premabai and her companion lay still for a few minutes. They conversed in signs. The Rajput soldier's more practised eye told him that about seven hundred horses were picketed in lines before them. It took some time to gauge their numbers by the uncertain fire-light. Where the other horses were he could not determine. The commander's immediate body-guard had evidently placed their horses elsewhere.

Only two men had been detailed as line guards—one was, however, lying full length on the ground and snoring peacefully almost within arm's length of them, the other was slowly moving up and down the lines. The soldier motioned to Premabai to lie quite still, and in pantomime he gave her to understand that, after stabbing the sleeper, he would wait till the other guard had come to the end of the nearest line and then he would spring upon him. After this both of them could cut the tethering ropes and then stampede the horses. It would all take time, they could but hope the impetuous Prince would not precipitate matters, thinking they were killed.

Down the line towards them came the guard to the recumbent figure that had only two minutes before been stabbed to death without a groan. He stooped down and roughly shook him. 'Wake up, Abdul Karim, 'tis your turn to tramp up and down, I am utterly weary.' Those were the last words he ever spoke. From out of the darkness a strong hand clutched him by the throat and rolled him over for the dagger to pierce his heart.

Swiftly arising, the Rajputs ran along the lines, severing as quickly as possible the tethering ropes. When they had released about three hundred horses they shouted and yelled and beat them so vigorously that they soon scampered off in a wild stampede. Many of those still tethered dragged up the stakes in their excitement and terror. Away they rushed madly through the camp. The noise and confusion, the oaths and curses of the rudely-awakened sleepers were audible afar. The commander and his body-guard rushed to where their horses were straining at their ropes, untethered and mounted them and endeavoured to bring some order into the camp. It was in vain. With their terrifying war-cry the Rajput horsemen were upon them from two sides. The slaughter was terrific. Afzal Khan, who had been in tight corners before, kept his head, and with a band of two hundred men counter-charged and drove the Rajputs off from before him. But he did not wheel round in time properly to meet the attack from behind made by the Prince, who with his men had swept once through the camp and was now returning for a second slaughter. The Muslim horse broke and fled, taking their commander with them, who saw no point in a useless sacrifice of life.

CHAPTER V

THE RANA RETURNS THANKS TO EKLINGA

AFZAL KHAN, with the small remnant that had escaped destruction, rode rapidly northwards, picking up his main forces, attenuated by the constant attacks of the feudal levies that had taken the field as planned by the Rana. Dhir Khan was holding his own near the township of Pur in the Doab, or region between the Kotari and the Banas. He had elephants and guns and had strongly entrenched his little army. The Rajputs contented themselves with cutting off his supplies from Ajmer and harassing his foraging parties. He could not have stayed much longer in his entrenched position. He determined, therefore, on the arrival of Afzal Khan to escape eastwards by night. He would thus avoid the fortress of Deogarh, Bednor and Banera and have easier country to march over. Accordingly he moved his forces through this little Doab, crossed over unmolested to the right bank of the Banas and followed the north-easterly course of that river past Kachhola, Jahazpur and Deoli. He had thus placed the river between himself and his enemies. With a strong rear-guard and a strengthened right flank to beat off any serious attack from Mandalgarh or from Bundi, he withdrew his forces to Ajmer in comparative safety to await the further commands of his imperial master. Aurangzeb was

angered at the ill-success of his generals, but could not afford to break with them. He was biding his time.

Great were the rejoicings in Mewar when their land was freed from the sacrilegious presence of their enemies. The Rana summoned to his court all the chieftains and nobles except those in the northern parts, who were bidden to keep their levies in the field to guard against any sudden descent of the Mughals. The city of Udaipur was *en fête*. The streets were brilliantly illuminated, the people in holiday garb. In every house worship was offered to the tutelary deity, Mahadeva. Congratulations poured in from every side upon the Rana. The court bard composed stanzas immortalising the exploits of Premabai and Bhim Singh. With their names thus coupled together, it occurred to more than one that an alliance between them would crown their glory. The Prince was vexed at the suggestion, he could not put the picture of the beautiful Ambalika from his mind, and was anxious to seize the first opportunity that came to ride off to Kolwa and pay his respects to the ladies who had been in his care.

At present, however, duty kept him at home. The Rana had announced that he would go in state and solemn procession to the shrine of Eklinga to return thanks for his country's deliverance.

Accordingly, on the appointed day, a magnificent procession wended its way through the Triple Gate, slowly to traverse the twelve miles between the city and the fane of Iswara, the tutelary deity of the Rana's house and country. In the midst, on a splendidly-caparisoned elephant whose forehead blazed with jewels, rode the Rana and his eldest son. They were seated on a silver howdah, whose top was made of gold with one

large scintillating diamond at its apex reflecting the rays of the morning sun. The Rana was dressed in a richly-embroidered robe of silk shot with gold. In his turban a gorgeous tiara sparkled, around his neck was a wonderful rope of pearls. Jai Singh was dressed more simply, yet with a regal simplicity. His turban was ornamented with graceful peacock plumes, his tunic gave out a silver sheen, in his belt were to be seen daggers whose jewelled sheaths and hilts were of curious workmanship. Before the Rana and his heir-apparent the royal insignia were borne—the silver trumpets, the kettle-drums, and the crimson banner with its golden sun. Close beside them, raised aloft on a pole, was the *Changi*, with its sun of gold in the centre of a disc of black ostrich feathers. The heralds ever and anon rehearsed the titles of their sovereign.

The people lining the route had ceased their merry chatter when they heard the weird music that heralded the procession. In respectful silence they watched it pass through their midst, and only broke out into joyous speech again as they fell in behind to accompany it the twelve miles on foot. On Bhim Singh had devolved the important duty of marshalling the procession. Accordingly, he was to be observed, a truly princely figure, on his favourite black horse Thunderbolt, riding now forwards, now to the rear, to keep the moving mass in due order without unsightly gaps. In this duty Jai Singh from his post of vantage on the elephant, helped him in a brotherly way by unobtrusive signals previously arranged between them.

Nearing their destination, Bhim Singh took his place at the head of the procession, followed immediately by the *Babas*, or the sons of the younger branches of the

Rana's own family. Then came the *Gol* chieftains, vassals whose fiefs did not exceed five thousand rupees of yearly rent. They were always in attendance on the Rana, and formed a most useful bulwark to the throne against any combination or opposition of the higher vassals. After these came the chieftains of the second rank, the *Batts*, whose yearly incomes might run up to the limit of fifty thousand rupees. They, also, were in constant attendance on their Prince. The latter were accompanied by their retainers.

At a signal from the marshal, they opened out into two lines, halted and turned their horses' heads inwards. Each chieftain carried a banner with the device of a dagger on a crimson field. Between these lines moved the royal elephant, preceded by the heralds and the regal insignia and followed by the chiefs of the highest rank with their retainers. It was only on special occasions, such as this, that 'the sixteen' nobles of Mewar attended their Rana. Behind them their retainers spread out into a wide semicircle to act as a barrier to the following populace. Their task was easy, for the people were most orderly.

The shrine of Eklinga is situated in a defile with hills towering around it on all sides, their scarp'd summits clustered with honeycombs in long black pendulous masses. From these hills trickled numerous small streams of water, keeping verdant many shrubs, particularly the oleander, the flowers of which are acceptable to the deity. The whole site was covered with groves of bamboo and mango.

At the portal of the fane, the Rana and his son, who had now descended from the kneeling elephant, were met by the chief priest, a venerable man who bore the

revered name of Harita in memory of the sage whose benediction obtained for the Gahlot Rajputs, as the Sesodias were called in ancient times, the sovereignty of Chitor when driven from Saurashtra by the Parthians. He led the Rana, his sons and the leading nobles into the spacious quadrangle wherein were assembled groups of Gosains, men who having, as their name implies, obtained control over the senses were admitted to the priesthood of Eklinga. Some of these groups were distinguished by the rings of the conch-shell placed in the lobes of their ears. They were men who, in fact, followed the profession of arms, an order of celibate military monks who had come in from their scattered monasteries for this most important occasion. In Mewar, the Rana could always muster many hundreds of these *Kanphara Jogi*, or 'split-ear ascetics'. They made excellent defensive soldiers, and had been trained to use that rather uncertain weapon the matchlock. Siva, their patron, was the God of War, and, following his example, they made great use of intoxicating herbs and even of spirituous liquors. When maddened by drug or by drink they were formidable foes to encounter.

Altogether they formed picturesque groups with their ash-smeared bodies over which they wore garments dyed an orange hue. Their hair was braided tiara-fashion round the head, and within the folds chaplets of the lotus seed were entwined. On their foreheads was the crescent, the distinguishing mark of the faith of Siva the three-eyed God, from whose central eye is to proceed *Pralaya*, or the final destruction of the universe. As a sign of this they bore on their foreheads a vertical mark resembling the flame of a taper.

Passing between these groups, who made obeisance

as he moved along, the Rana advanced towards the sanctuary. The white marble walls of the fans dazzled the eye overpoweringly in the bright sunshine. Under an open-vaulted temple supported by columns was the four-faced divinity. Above him towered the pyramidal pinnacle surmounted by a golden ball. Fronting him was the bull Nanda of natural size, cast in bronze and of excellent proportions. It was the Rana's privilege as 'dewan of Eklinga' to perform the rites and ceremonies, superseding the high priest in his duties. Rana Raj Singh was a learned man and carried out the due ritual with peculiar correctness and grace.

The blowing of conch-shells and the rattle of the kettle-drums announced the termination of the worship and the coming forth of the Rana from the sacred precincts. The people raised a mighty shout, 'Victory to our Prince,' and the return procession was about to begin when the Rana was most humbly approached by a deputation of Brahmans. Their leader stepped forward and addressed him as he was about to ascend into the howdah.

'Maharana,' he said, 'protector of the poor and shield of the Gods, ill news has come to us from our brethren in Agra and Muttra and the sacred soil of Vraj. The fanatic who rules at Delhi has decreed the Jizya upon all who follow not Islam, his officers are carrying out his orders with rapacious zeal and seizing from our harmless Hindu brothers many times the value of this poll-tax. Would that the benign Akbar were still upon the throne. Some demon possesses the body of our Emperor. In the distant provinces we learn he has proscribed our faith, is demolishing our images and levelling our temples. Soon, we fear, the sacrilegious

mischief will visit Vraj Great Krishna is in peril
The gentle God must again seek safety in flight To thy
strong arm, defender of our ancient faith, we look for
protection'

All who heard these words were wroth and placed
their hands upon the hilts of their swords as if to draw
them in defence of their religion Slowly and thought-
fully the Rana spake 'O Brahmans, truly Aurangzeb
is looking for great sorrow We have but now chased
his generals from the field and cleared our land of the
impious foe, forthwith must we go and beard the tyrant
in his own province Jai Singh, to thee it is most fitting
that I entrust the safe withdrawal of the flute-playing
God to the sanctuary of our strong city Bhim Singh
shall bear a letter of remonstrance to the Emperor, if
haply he may be turned from his evil courses.'

Thus briefly and unhesitatingly did the great and
illustrious Rana Raj Singh of Mewar embark on a
policy fraught with serious consequences Piety and
patriotism alike inspired him to oppose the mighty
Aurangzeb, lord of many a wealthy province from which
great armies could be drawn

Without more words the Rana mounted the elephant,
and the stately procession set forth on its homeward
journey

CHAPTER VI

A VISIT TO KELWA

BHIM SINGH was overjoyed. The bad tidings the Brahmans had brought two days previously had, at first, made him feel that his chances of slipping away to Kelwa to pay a visit to the ladies he had the honour of escorting were gone for an indefinite period. But the Rana, after a serious deliberation with his chieftains, had decided to wait until the worst of the rainy season had passed before sending his army under Jai Singh's command to rescue the endangered deity. To move the God on his heavy car over mountain tracks and swampy plains would be a matter of great difficulty. Aurangzeb could never dream that a bold attempt at rescue would be made. Certainly no Hindu would ever think of breathing a word about it. The risk of waiting must be taken, serious though it was and irksome to the devout Brahmans. Meanwhile he ordered that quantities of timber should be felled near all the swampy places, to be laid down when the time came as a road over which the heavy car might pass without being embogged. And Bhim Singh was to take despatches to the Rani of Jodhpur, apprising her of all this and urging her to gather her forces and make a diversion in three months' time in the direction of Delhi.

The Prince made all his preparations for departure in

a very happy frame of mind. He planned to take a small escort and to stay away in the mountains for a considerable time. It would be of very great advantage to him to explore the Aravallis, to learn all the difficult tracks, and to make friends if possible with the wild mountain tribes. Should the Emperor find himself free from troubles in other quarters, he would assuredly advance in great strength against his daring foes to punish once and for all their arrogance in withstanding his fanaticism. Then the war would be carried into the mountains. Sivaji, 'the Mountain Rat,' had shown him how difficult it was to overcome a guerrilla foe. But such was the pride of the great Mughal, such his confidence in numbers and in his own military capacity, that he might persist in his arduous task and drive the Rajputs to serious straits.

Foreseeing this, the wise chieftain of Salumbar had given a hint to Bhim Singh to make the most of his present opportunities to acquaint himself with the intricacies of the Aravallis, promising him at the same time to prevent the Rana becoming uneasy at his long absence. Salumbar had taken a strong liking to the manly youth and wished to see him make a name for himself like a second Partab.

Pushing rapidly on, the Prince and his small escort of fifty men soon found themselves at the entrance of that fertile alpine valley, the Shera Nala. He had, in passing, noted the salient features of the country, the number and direction of the low broken ridges covered with various prickly shrubs, and now he stood at the break in the hills through which the Banas flows. He followed with his eye the meanderings of the stream up through the majestic valley.

Eager as he was to get on, he could not resist a short delay in which to admire the grandeur of nature. The valley before him varied in breadth, but was seldom, so far as he could judge, less than four furlongs across. The hills rose boldly from their base, some with a fine and even surface covered with mango trees, others lifting their splintered pinnacles into the clouds. Nature had been lavish of her beauties to this romantic region. The wild fig, the custard apple and the peach abounded, the banks of the stream were shaded by the withy, while the large trees, the mango, the picturesque tamarind and the sacred peepul were scattered throughout in great profusion. From the margin of the stream on each side to the mountain's base a series of terraces had been constructed, rising one over another, on which rich crops of sugar-cane, cotton and rice were cultivated, irrigated by the water from the stream raised in all sorts of ingenious ways. Wherever soil could be found, it had been greedily seized on, whether in the hollows below or on the summit of a crag. Pools or reservoirs dammed in with massive trees plastered with mud helped to water these seemingly inaccessible spots. Rice and maize and Indian corn in turn were grown here. In spite of possible disaster from unduly heavy rains or from locusts this region, belonging to the royal demesne, was undeniably fertile and could support great numbers of the dwellers on the tablelands below if, as had happened more than once in their history, they had to take refuge in the mountains.

Aurangzeb, reflected the Prince, would find it difficult to starve them out. Other valleys in these well-watered hills could also contribute to their support. Death in battle was glorious, but death by starvation did not at

all appeal to him. One of his chiefest forebodings was now laid to rest.

About six miles further on, they came to the foot of a mountain distinctively named *Rana Pag*, from the well-known path by which the Ranas secured their retreat to the upland wilds when hard pushed by their foes. This track led directly to Kelwa, but Bhim Singh determined to follow a more roundabout route whilst one of his men took the short cut to announce their coming.

Not much higher up the valley they came to 'the elephant's pool' at the foot of a mountain on the left through a cleft in which a stream rushed down. Bhim Singh noted it for later exploration, for he imagined that through that rocky cleft a foot-passenger might find a path to Kelwa.

At the end of the range which terminated abruptly on his left, the Prince turned towards Kelwa and found that the valley enlarged itself, presenting here a wild, picturesque and rugged appearance. At the upper end of the valley at the base of Kumbhalmer lay the town in which the lady of his dreams was sheltered. He was bursting with eager joy to see her fair face again.

His messenger galloped out to meet him and tell him that the ladies awaited his coming. From the gates came a small body of horsemen under Durgadas the Rahtor leader to welcome him. The Prince had hoped to make the acquaintance of this redoubtable champion of Ajit's rights. He looked at him with keen interest as he came cantering up on a white horse, and was able, during his brief welcoming speech, to see what sort of a man this famous chief of Droonara was.

He looked, every inch of his six feet of body, a soldier born and bred to the saddle. His fine black moustaches

curled upwards in military fashion, his strong square chin was covered by a short dark beard. His glance was quick and keen, the eyes deep set under bushy black eyebrows. A fine aquiline nose and a firm mouth added to the handsomeness of his appearance.

On his side also Durgadas had been taking the measure of the Prince. Looking him up and down in his quick decisive manner he very soon came to the conclusion that here was a young man full of promise and full of grit. He took to him at once. At the end of his speech he stretched out his right hand and grasped that of the Prince in a most cordial manner.

'Prince,' he said, 'on behalf of my sovereign lady, the Rani, I have just welcomed you, now on my own behalf I greet you as a brother-in-arms, and here is my right hand in token of unswerving friendship.'

'Chief,' replied the Prince, quite overcome by this enthusiastic reception, 'you have done me a great honour by admitting me whom you have not seen before to your friendship. May I ever show myself worthy of it.'

Side by side they rode through the town, beyond which the fort was constructed on rising ground. Within the fort lay a small palace that was occasionally used by the Rani as a hunting-box. It was a good solid building but architecturally was without pretensions. In fact it had been designed more as a place of defence against mountain robbers than a palace. The flat roof had a high wall around it pierced with slits for bowmen, and the balconies were protected in much the same way.

As they dismounted in the courtyard, there floated down from above the sweet tinkle of a *Veena*, accompanied by a lovely girlish voice singing a love lyric. The Prince stood entranced, rooted to the spot. Instinct told him

that it was Ambahka's voice, though the sound of it had never yet reached his ears. Was it by chance or by design that she had chosen a well-known lyric of love just at the moment of his alighting?

Durgadas for a brief moment wondered why the Prince stood so motionless. He himself had no ear for chamber music, he preferred the song of the sword. But realising it was Ambahka's voice, he smiled a slow smile beneath his heavy moustaches and said to himself, 'Why not? why not? The young man deserves a fair bride, and the girl though shy is a good girl with plenty of spirit at bottom. The Rani may not welcome this idea methinks she is beginning to turn her thoughts to one or two of our Rahtor kinsmen, well, well, the path of true lovers is oft strewn with difficulties. Let be, the Prince will surely find a way to win the fair one, I'll warrant.'

The Prince was most graciously received by the ladies. A long afternoon was spent in relating his adventures since they had so abruptly parted company on the banks of the Banas. The Prince had asked them first to tell him how they themselves had fared. But the Rani said their story was short and would keep for afterwards, and the Princess of Amber had looked so appealingly at him that he was forced to comply with their wishes.

He told them of the night attack, of the foresight and courage of Premabai, and how the success of the venture had been entirely due to her and to his brave men. He himself had but done his simple duty. He told them of the great and solemn procession to the shrine of Eklings and the worship of thanksgiving ending as it had done with such disquieting news. At this point he handed over to the Rani his father's letter for her to

read at her leisure He expressed his joy at seeing them so well and, with a meaning glance at Ambalika, so happy in their new home

The Princess blushed and looked down The Ram warmly praised her talent, saying what a comfort and solace the dear girl had been to her in this secluded quiet spot The Princess threw her arms around the good queen's neck, and in a sweet low voice said—'Devi, you are to me more than a mother, it is my greatest joy to help you thank me not, dear, dear queen'

Bhim Singh was enchanted, and longed for the day when those fair arms might be about his own neck and that sweet voice whispering in his ear. But he said nothing except to remind the Rani that it was now her turn to tell her tale

Korundevi then gave him a brief but graphic account of their journeyings They had been somewhat troubled by the Bhils but the Bedla chieftain had kept this over-curious folk at a distance with some well-aimed arrows and chased them away by sudden sharp charges She told him how they had travelled by night, carrying torches to keep away the tigers whose roars had so frightened Ambalika And now they were well guarded by the Rao of Bedla's men and her own brave soldiers under Durgadas

Many such pleasant evenings were passed in each other's company Ambalika lost her shyness and spoke to the Prince of her childhood's happy days in Amber, and questioned him often about Premabai—whose amazon exploits fired her imagination Bhim Singh was in the seventh heaven of happiness

CHAPTER VII

THE RANA SENDS A LETTER TO AURANGZEB

EARLY in the month of Aswija, Bhim Singh found himself with his small escort approaching the imperial city. A few days previously he had parted company with his brother at Muttra. He had not waited to see the actual removal of the God whom they had come in such strong force to rescue. To allay suspicion it had been given out that Rana Raj Singh was sending his sons with their contingents to attend the Emperor's Court, a duty in which the Rana of Udaipur had been altogether remiss of late years. To give colour to this pretension Jai Singh had left his main body some distance in the rear, and had advanced to Muttra with just the number of Mewar's former customary contingents. It was also pretended that the Rana's letter was full of apologies for past laxity in this respect. *in this respect*

This bazaar gossip was duly forwarded to Delhi by the Emperor's secret newswriters. Aurangzeb realised clearly enough that such pretexts were meant merely as a blind to the common people and to throw his officers off the scent. He sent an express messenger to his Navabs to watch the Rajputs closely and to see that they did no mischief. It was too late.

The God in his decorated and rather unwieldy Vahana had been secretly removed by night and was now well

on his long journey towards Udaipur. Jai Singh, in consultation with his father, had chosen as direct a route as possible, and over as much open country as they could find, striking through the flat plains of Bharatpur to the left bank of the Banganga. It was his intention to follow the course of this river nearly as far as Amber. The Kachhwahas could be relied upon to ward off attacks. Then he purposed to turn due south past Malpura to Raj Mahal on the Banas, to cross the river by the ferry at this most picturesque spot, and to follow the right bank almost up to its source. He would thus have both flanks protected, the right by the river, now in flood after the rains, and the left by the Bundi hills.

Bhum Singh was met outside the city walls by Raja Shyam Singh of Bikaner, who had been sent out by the Emperor to welcome him. The Raja was astonished at the smallness of the contingent, for he had heard the current bazaar rumour. When he learnt the facts he was somewhat dismayed. 'Bhum Singh,' he said, 'you are putting your head into the lion's mouth. The letter you bear assuredly contains no "apologies." Aurangzeb will wage ruthless war upon your father. Do you wish to miss all the exciting times hereafter?'

'Why, Maharaja, is it possible that the Emperor should maltreat an ambassador? Their persons have always been held sacrosanct. In what way can I be held responsible for the idle chatter of the mob?'

'Nay, but it was your people that started the idle chatter. The Emperor will be annoyed at your trickery, and at the looks of surprise that will pass round the court when 'tis known you came with only fifty men. As for maltreating you—that is not probable. He is more

heroes were Could any Sesodia be ignorant of their noble prouress ? Every child in the Rana's dominions knew how Jamal of Bednor and his kinsman Patta of Kelwa had met a glorious death in the defence of Ohitor against Akbar So great had been the Emperor's appreciation of their courage that he had caused these memorials to be made and placed at the entrance of his fortress A few years later, in his chagrin at being discomfited in his Rajput war, Aurangzeb with pitifully petty spite was to mutilate these memorials of fidelity and valour set up by the magnanimous Akbar

'Behold, Bhim Singh,' said the Raja, pointing to the figure of Jamal, 'a hero indeed A beardless youth, with his tender bride fighting by his side, 'tis said he encountered the great Akbar himself. In that fierce struggle outside the fortress gate they perished with many thousands more A pity the Emperor did not commemorate the girl A finer death, methinks, than on the funeral pyre which so many of her sisters mounted in the dark vaults within the fortress on that disastrous day'

Bhim Singh's thoughts flew to the intrepid Premabai, but he trusted that the day would never come when his beloved Ambalika might have to face such a death He could not picture her in battle She was too tender a flower. But he knew that, should the need arise, the dormant Rajput courage would be awakened and would nerve her to even such a heroine's death as that of Jamal's bride

'Why did you, Maharaja, seek to turn me aside from danger ? Perchance you had forgotten these ?'

'Nay, I did but test you Besides, it is ever better to know wherein the danger lies A foe in the open field

is a hundred times easier to face than a subtle hypocrite
Forewarned is forearmed'

So saying, the Raja led the way into the great square in front of the fortress, pausing before the Lahore Gate to show the Prince the long broad street, the Chandni Chowk, with its arcaded shops on either side, that ran straight through the centre of the city from this grand gateway

Thus at last they came to the Raja's tents at the northern end of the square. It was Bikaner's turn to mount guard for a week with his contingent. Amirs and mansabdars might perform this duty within the citadel, but no Rajput chief would expose himself and his men to the danger of treachery. The Emperor had not dared to insist. The Rajputs had proved themselves far too useful in the imperial armies, and now this custom had become established.

Shortly before noon on the following day the Prince and his men were conducted by the Raja to the citadel. Full of a boyish curiosity, Bhim Singh was little prepared for the grandeur of the sights that were to burst upon his view and take his breath away.

Passing through the Lahore Gate, they found themselves in a long vaulted arcade, the horses' hoofs making the lofty roof re-echo loud enough to drown the music from the Nakkas Khana. Weird music it was, too, in which wide-mouthed trumpets, clashing cymbals and rattling kettle-drums seemed to vie with one another to see which could make the loudest din. Heard at close quarters the music sounded harsh, but on a distant ear it fell melodiously modulated. For this reason the musicians' gallery had been placed over the main entrance to the very spacious inner court, so that it

might sound pleasingly to the ladies in the seraglio far beyond.

Beneath this gate they dismounted. None but princes of the royal blood might ride beyond it. The Prince, as his custom was, looked keenly around. In the centre of the court they had just traversed was a tank, along two sides ran arcades. To right and to left ran streets, at right angles to the courtyard, with miniature canals running down the middle. Down these streets the Prince had vistas of pretty little houses and alcoves with fountains and gardens and all kinds of flowering shrubs. These were the quarters of the amirs and other imperial officers. In one of these houses the Prince was to spend a weary time, with nothing to do but kick his heels and plan ways of escape, an honourable captivity, but dreadfully irksome to a lover of wide spaces and the fresh mountain breeze.

The music ceased as the Raja and Bhim Singh crossed the spacious inner court to the noble hall of public audience, the *Diwan-i-'Am*. Two of their men followed, bearing gifts, for no ambassador ever approached the Presence without an offering. Raised considerably from the ground, this nobly-proportioned hall was open on the three sides that looked into the court. It was light and airy. The ceiling and the several rows of pillars with the engrailed arches between them, painted and overlaid with gold, could thus be seen to advantage. At the upper end, in the centre of the wall that separated the hall from the seraglio, in a wide and lofty opening higher from the floor than a man could reach, sat the Emperor on the famous Peacock Throne.

Bhim Singh was astounded at its magnificence. Report had never conveyed to him the least idea of its

Around his neck was a rope of immense pearls hanging down into his lap Bhim Singh could not help admiring him in spite of his high and unbending look

Their approach over the immense rich silk carpets that covered the marble floor had been noiseless, but at the sight of them the Emperor smiled graciously They mounted the steps to the platform which was surrounded by a silver railing at the foot of the throne. Here were assembled the amirs and rajas in splendid attire, all standing, their eyes bent downward and their hands crossed At a greater distance from the throne the mansabdars and lesser officials were standing, also in the same posture of profound reverence

The Raja of Bikaner salaamed profoundly, placing his hand thrice upon his head and as often dropping it down to the ground Bhim Singh followed his example

'Huzur,' said the Raja in a loud clear voice, 'I have brought my fellow-countryman according to your command to the Presence Prince Bhim Singh of Udaipur brings with him a letter and gifts from Rana Raj to the Imperial Majesty'

In his confusion the Prince was about to hand, or rather attempt to hand, the letter to the Emperor himself He was intercepted by an amir who stepped forward and received it A eunuch was hidden to take it up The Emperor, before breaking the seals, raised it above his head as a mark of great respect 'Ho, ho,' thought Bhim Singh, 'the little game of studied politeness is beginning Let us see how he will relish the contents' With a grave and unmoved countenance Aurangzeb perused the lengthy epistle and gave no outward sign of displeasure 'Crafty old fox,' said the Prince to himself, 'who can tell what his thoughts are?'

This done, the Emperor intimated that the Rana's gifts might be brought. At a sign from Raja Shiam Singh, who had taken his usual place amongst the attendant rajas, the two Rajput men mounted onto the platform, salaamed deeply and handed the gifts to the Prince—enamelled vases of the best Amber workmanship, a ruby and a diamond of price, and a richly inlaid dagger of cunning craftsmanship that, on a spring being touched in the handle, opened out into three deadly blades of the finest tempered steel. These gifts were handed up to the Emperor, who examined them minutely and praised them highly. The Prince was relieved, and began to think that the monarch's gracious and condescending manner was sincere after all.

Then, at a sign from the throne, two amirs came forward and invested the Prince with a *Ser-apah*, or vesture from head to foot—a vest of rich brocade, a turban and a sash of embroidered silk. His own turban with its peacock plume was handed back to one of the Rajput gift-bearers. Raja Shiam Singh motioned to the Prince to come and take his place by his side, whilst his two attendants should withdraw. With profound salaams they moved backwards from before the throne, the Prince to a place on the right of the platform and the two men to the bottom of the hall where the crowd of retainers was.

For one hour more the *darbar* lasted, and the Prince made good use of his eyes. In the great court in front of the *Diwan-i-'Am* the royal horses were paraded that Aurangzeb might see whether they were in good condition. The elephants came next, their hides painted black with two large red streaks down their foreheads meeting on the trunks. Their backs were covered with embroidered

cloth; silver bells were suspended to the ends of a massive silver chain placed over the cloth trappings, and white chowries hung from their ears. Four small elephants, superbly caparisoned, walked close to these creatures in a solemn and dignified manner. Each beast as it came in sight of the throne was made to bend its knee, lift up its trunk and trumpet aloud.

Other animals were next introduced: tame antelopes kept for the purpose of fighting each other, large Bengal buffaloes with prodigious horns that enabled them to contend against lions and tigers, tame hunting cheetahs, sporting dogs covered with red cloth, and, lastly, hawks and falcons of all kinds.

Finally there were brought the carcasses of sheep neatly bound up without the entrails. Bhim Singh wondered greatly what these could be meant for. But he soon saw young amirs, mansabdars and mace-bearers advancing in turn to show their strength and skill in cutting through the four feet, which were fastened together, and the body at one stroke of their swords.

The Emperor rose and descending the marble stairs passed out of the hall into his private apartments beyond, accompanied by his sons and the eunuchs. The durbar was at an end. An officer of the household advanced and conducted the Prince to the quarters that had been allotted to him in the fort near the Delhi Gate.

CHAPTER VIII

THE EMPEROR CONSIDERS HIS REPLY

THE Emperor was highly incensed. The Rana's letter had rankled in his mind throughout a sleepless night, and now news had come that the Nawab of Muttra had been tricked. Immediately on discovering what had taken place during the night the Nawab reported that he had set out in hot pursuit. Early in the forenoon he had come up with the retreating Rajputs, twenty thousand strong. The temple car was lumbering along before them, dragged by several hundred Bhaktas and other willing helpers. A hot encounter had ensued, and a stern hand-to-hand fight in which many dead were left on the field. Late in the afternoon the Rajputs had broken and fled. But to his astonishment he had found the car empty. It was not the car of Krishna but of some lesser deity. He had burnt it. He had naturally imagined that the Rajputs would go the way they had come. The people were in active sympathy with them and their reports were false and misleading. He now awaited the orders of His Majesty.

This news coming on top of the Rana's letter annoyed Alamgir exceedingly. He had just sent a reply to the Nawab to say that his commands would soon follow, and was now slowly pacing to and fro in a superbly-decorated upper chamber of the palace overlooking the Jumna.

Short in stature and slender in figure he walked with a distinct stoop, his hands behind his back clasping the letter that Bhim Singh had brought the previous morning. The contents had outraged his feelings. He had determined to communicate them to none but his son Sultan Muhammad Akbar, whose coming he impatiently waited.

On his son's entry, Aurangzeb seated himself on a low divan at the end of the room and motioned his son to sit near him—a mark of high condescension and a sign that some most confidential matters were to be discussed.

'Akbar,' he began in a low voice, 'these Rajputs are daring beyond measure. Their insolence must be curbed. They have removed the great idol of Krishna at Muttra and tricked the pursuit. This impudent letter is long. Give close heed. I shall read it to you. Thereafter we must deliberate what course to pursue. Thus much I now premise, I have determined to visit Udaipur with condign punishment.'

Aurangzeb then read aloud slowly in low even tones the dignified letter of remonstrance of Rana Raj Singh.

'All due praise be rendered to the glory of the Almighty, and the munificence of Your Majesty, which is as conspicuous as the sun and moon. Although I your well-wisher have separated myself from your sublime presence, I am nevertheless zealous in the performance of every bounden act of obedience and loyalty. Thus my inclination is notorious, nor can your royal wisdom entertain a doubt thereof. Reflecting therefore on my former services and Your Majesty's condescension, I presume to solicit the royal attention to some circumstances in which public as well as private welfare is greatly interested.

' I have been informed that enormous sums have been dissipated in the prosecution of the designs formed against me, your well-wisher, and that you have ordered a tribute to be levied to satisfy the exigencies of your exhausted treasury

' May it please Your Majesty, your royal ancestor Muhammad Jelālu'd-dīn Akbar, whose throne is now in heaven, conducted the affairs of this empire in equity and firm security for the space of fifty-two years, preserving every tribe of men in ease and happiness whether they were followers of Jesus or of Moses, of David or Muhammad, were they Brahmans, were they of the sect of Dharians, which denies the eternity of matter, or of that which ascribes the existence of the world to chance, they all equally enjoyed his countenance and favour insomuch that his people, in gratitude for the indiscriminate protection he afforded them, distinguished him by the appellation of "Guardian of Mankind"

' His Majesty, Nuru'd-dīn Jahangir, likewise, whose dwelling is now in paradise, extended, for a period of twenty-two years, the shadow of his protection over the heads of his people, successful by a constant fidelity to his allies, and a vigorous exertion of his arm in business

' Nor less did the illustrious Shah Jehan, by a propitious reign of thirty-two years, acquire to himself immortal reputation, the glorious reward of clemency and virtue

' Such were the benevolent inclinations of your ancestors Whilst they pursued these great and generous principles, wheresoever they directed their steps, conquest and prosperity went before them, and then they reduced many countries and fortresses to their obedience

During Your Majesty's reign, many have been alienated from the empire, and further loss of territory must necessarily follow, since devastation and rapine now universally prevail without restraint Your subjects are trampled underfoot and every province of your empire is impoverished; depopulation spreads and difficulties accumulate When indigence has reached the habitation of the sovereign and his princes, what can be the condition of the nobles? As to the soldiery, they are in murmurs; the merchants complaining, the Muhammadans discontented, the Hindus destitute, and multitudes of people, wretched even to the want of their nightly meal, are beating their heads throughout the day in rage and desperation

'How can the dignity of the sovereign be preserved who employs his power in exacting heavy tributes from a people thus miserably reduced? At this juncture it is told from east to west that the Emperor of Hindustan, jealous of the poor Hindu devotee, will exact a tribute from Brahmans, Sanorahs, yogis, barragis and sanyasis, that, regardless of the illustrious honour of his Timurean race, he condescends to exercise his power over the solitary inoffensive anchorite If Your Majesty place any faith in these books, by distinction called divine, you will there be instructed that God is the God of all mankind, not the God of Muhammadans alone The Pagan and the Musulman are equally in his presence Distinctions of colour are of his ordination It is he who gives existence In your temples, to his name the voice is raised in prayer, in a house of images, where the bell is shaken, still he is the object of adoration To vilify the religion or customs of other men is to set at naught the pleasure of the Almighty.

'In fine, the tribute you demand from the Hindus is repugnant to justice, it is equally foreign to good policy, as it must impoverish the country moreover, it is an innovation and an infringement of the laws of Hindustan. But if zeal for your religion hath induced you to determine upon this measure, the demand ought, by the rules of equity, to have been made first upon Ram Singh, who is esteemed the principal amongst the Hindus. Then let your well-wisher be called upon, with whom you will have less difficulty to encounter, but to torment ants and flies is unworthy of a heroic or generous mind. It is wonderful that the ministers of your Government should have neglected to instruct Your Majesty in the rules of rectitude and honour.'

'By the beard of the Prophet! that last is insufferably insolent,' growled the Emperor, clenching his fist. 'Does he presume to lecture me upon the duties of religion? I do but humbly strive to carry out what the holy Qur'an ordains. This impious infidel dares to asperse the commands of the Prophet (Peace be on His Name) Muhammad of his mercy bids the faithful spare the life of the unbeliever if he pay the Jizya. The Rana would dispute it with me—Alamgir! He shall know what it is to challenge my power. Look, Akbar, at this—the sign of a lance over his seal. Ha! so he would threaten me, would he?'

'Nay, my father,' replied Akbar, who, being the son of a Rajput princess, knew something of their customs, 'that is but an ancient custom. 'Tis the privilege of the Rana's hereditary chief councillor, the Rawat of Salumbar, to place his emblem over the Rana's seal on all important documents. It is a privilege of long standing in honour of his ancestor Chonda who renounced

his rights to the *gadi* in favour of his younger brother
It signifies no threat'

'No matter,' rejoined his father, 'this letter shall be answered by stern deeds and not by soft words. From all the provinces I shall gather my armies. You and your brothers shall lead them. On both sides of the mountains we shall proceed in overwhelming strength, for Jaswant's kinsmen too must be beaten to the dust. The infant must be surrendered to my care. They have the effrontery to ascribe the death of Jaswant's first-born son to me. Smallpox, forsooth, comes from a poisoned robe! See how I trusted them and gave them high honours. It is their own ill-doing they attribute to me.'

Sultan Akbar murmured assent whilst his father paused for breath in his excessive agitation. It was most unusual for the prudent, cold and crafty Aurangzeb to betray strong emotion. Akbar had never seen him so moved. The end of the world was about to come upon the Rajputs.

'Now,' he resumed, 'for our immediate cares. The Rana's son shall be our hostage. I have given orders that he shall not be permitted forth from the citadel, nor his men from the city. Every gate is watched. We shall hoodwink the young man and show him all honour. He must make up for his father's remissness about attendance at our court. You, Akbar, do you visit the young man and show him all friendliness. Let him know that etiquette demands that an ambassador must await our pleasure that the longer we detain him, the greater the honour shown to his father. He seems a simple-minded youth. Perchance, too, you may glean useful information from him if you proceed with skill and caution.'

With these words the Emperor signed to his son that the interview was over and that he might take his departure Sultan Akbar arose and with obeisances left the chamber, to proceed forthwith on a visit to Bhim Singh, whose appearance had so impressed him 'He is not so simple,' thought the Sultan, 'as my father seems to think We shall see 'Twill be a pleasant occupation these idle days at Court'

CHAPTER IX

PRINCE BHIM ESCAPES

'NAY, nay, I am content enough. Such honour so graciously shown by your revered father will please me, and so I rejoice. Look at these noble gifts His Majesty has showered upon me. Almost every day some distinction is shown to my unworthy self. It is overwhelming kindness. Please convey to His Majesty my deep gratitude. I am content to await his imperial pleasure, especially as he has sent you to entertain me.'

Thus Bhim Singh answered the question of Sultan Muhammad Akbar as the latter was taking his leave one starry night in the month of Pushya. For many weeks now the Sultan had been constantly visiting the Prince. He had begun by hypocritical friendship, he was fast becoming a sincere friend. He had learnt to admire the young man for his artless pose and for his skill in fencing awkward questions. He had very soon given up practising upon him and they had fallen to talking of the pleasures of the chase.

Bhim Singh narrated the story of his first boar and Akbar in turn told of his first tiger. Akbar was more than twice the Prince's age and had had many exciting adventures. He told of a great elephant fight on the sandy stretch between the palace and the river bank, how, in order to get a better view of the struggling

monsters, he and his brothers had left the upper balconies and had mounted their ponies. He had ventured too near, and one elephant, getting the worst of the encounter, had left off fighting and had dashed madly at him. The mahout, lying on the hind quarters of the beast, clinging to the rope that passed round its back, could do nothing to restrain the infuriated monster. His pony and he had stood rooted to the spot in terror. But, soon coming to himself, he had dug in his spurs and charged. At close quarters he had hurled his spear into the leviathan's trunk, but to little purpose. The beast had caught his pony's legs, and over they had rolled into the sand. Luckily the pony had fallen between them and had received the prodding tusks, but before the elephant could kneel and crush the poor creature he had sprung to his feet and with his sword had slashed severely at the softer part of the uplifted trunk. The pain of this had made the enraged monster, screaming loudly, wheel about and once more engage his former foe who had come lumbering after him.

Prince Bhim's eyes glistened with excitement as he listened to this stirring tale.

'Sultan,' he exclaimed, 'my Rajputs call me brave, but such courage as yours! I should have fled.'

'Then,' rejoined Akbar, 'you would have been killed. A pony is no match in speed for a madly infuriated elephant.'

'Have you ever hunted the lion, Sultan?' asked Bhim Singh after a pause. 'They say that a lion is a more formidable foe than a tiger, who, after all, is a cowardly beast.'

'No, never,' replied the Sultan, 'lion-hunting as arranged by the imperial shukaris is a tame affair.'

There is no sport in it and no danger The poor beast has no chance The bait is drugged with opium, the lion gets drowsy, a net is drawn around his lair My father comes up on an elephant The sleepy lion, prodded by long pikes into activity, with a roar springs at him, is entangled in the net and shot by a musket ball His Majesty, the Emperor, is now old, and etiquette demands such arrangements 'Tis butchery, not sport'

Thus with many tales of adventure and shikar on both sides these two men learned to like each other—a liking firmly grounded on the true sportsman's admiration for a brother of the craft

In one of his earliest visits, the Sultan had brought with him to show the Prince his sporting dogs and his falcons He detailed the methods of training and enumerated the qualities looked for by the breeder Delighted to meet such an enthusiastic enquirer into such details, the Sultan had presented Bhim Singh with a couple of his best dogs and a beautiful falcon

This was indeed a useful gift to the Prince, who was growing suspicious of the dishes occasionally sent by courtesy from the imperial kitchen He tested the food on these animals before partaking of it himself, making some remarks about a Rajput's devotion to animals and the honour to be shown to them These remarks were intended to reach the ear of any possible spy

That he was, as Raja Shyam had predicted, a prisoner had become evident to the young man ever since the morning when, thinking to take a stroll into the city, he had been courteously turned back at the gate The guards had said that an ambassador's life was as the apple of the Emperor's eye, and that it was against

etiquette for such an honourable personage to venture alone into the dangerous streets. A thin excuse but sufficient for the Prince, who meekly apologised for his youthful ignorance.

And so the time had passed. At first there had been plenty to see of interest. Each week the Emperor sat on a different throne, magnificent and blazing with jewels, but none of the other six was equal to that stupendous marvel the Peacock Throne. Each Friday he had watched the Emperor's departure to say prayers in the mosque. Not a few of the amirs had entertained him in their quarters in the citadel. For many nights he had watched them and the superior mansabdars mounting guard in the fortress, vying with one another in smartness of turn-out and gorgeousness of equipment. Now the gilded captivity was beginning to pall, and the Prince began to turn his thoughts to escape.

He assumed a contentment that he did not feel and put on as much swagger as possible, as if overpowered by a sense of his importance and possessed of a desire to stay in such a paradise for ever. In this strain he artlessly prattled to the imperial officers. In the Rana's court, he explained, he was nobody, here at last his true merit was acknowledged by the discerning eye of majesty. Would not the Emperor take him into his distinguished service? A more faithful servant it would be hard to find. Thus he lulled their suspicions and confirmed the Emperor's notion that he was indeed a simple-minded fellow whose head was easily turned. The Prince was taking no chances. He had no wish to be caught when once he did get away and be ignominiously brought back to a dungeon.

He almost imposed on Sultan Akbar, who, however,

was generous enough to keep his suspicions of the young man's true character to himself. So Akbar had duly informed his father of the sincere desire of the Rajput Prince to conform to *etiquette* and await the imperial pleasure. And to impress his father with his astuteness he gave him all sorts of interesting information purporting to have been wormed out of the Prince, but really gathered from other sources.

Raja Shyam Singh had kept aloof. Of him the Prince saw nothing except at the public durbars. The Raja had no wish to be implicated in the Prince's previously declared design of escape. Bhim Singh respected his reluctance and understood his aloofness. After all, the Raja had given no pledge for his security—he was in no way responsible to Mewar for his safety, and had in truth openly warned the Prince of his danger. As the weeks slipped past, the Raja was beginning to wonder whether the current estimate of the Prince's character might not be correct.

Very little news of the outside world reached the captive. Of tattle-tattle of court gossip he had plenty, of the squabbles between the amirs, of this one's rise and the other one's humiliation, but of Rajasthan not a word. He knew not whether the God had reached his new home in safety, or what his father was thinking at not receiving any news from Delhi. He had judged it wiser not to attempt to write. That the crafty Emperor was preparing a stern answer to the Rana's letter, the general purport of which the young man was acquainted with, Bhim Singh had no doubt. He knew the Emperor was playing with him, he on his side could play the game of bluff equally well. Hence his apparently sincere answer to Sultan Akbar's question.

The Emperor had over-reached himself His giving of lavish gifts, especially of rings and jewels, to the Prince was a mistake It put the means of bribery into the young man's hands, and he had come almost without a coin in his pockets !

It was some time before the Prince decided, after careful scrutiny, which of the many servants assigned to him was corruptible The merest accident revealed him Sultan Akbar, in explaining the amusements of the seraglio, had mentioned with a tinge of regret that his father paid more attention to decorum than Shah Jahan had done He would not permit the dancing guls to enter It was only in compliance with long-established custom that he allowed them to come every Wednesday to the public audience to make their salaams from a distance and then immediately retire The Prince applauded this prohibition, and went on warmly but hypocritically to praise the Emperor's devotion to his faith and zeal for religion Chancing to glance up as he spoke, he noticed a distinct look of disgust pass over the face of one of the attendants bringing in the sherbet

Muhammad Ali, so the Prince learnt by judicious enquiry later on, was a Shiah who did not at all approve of his imperial master's strict Sunni orthodoxy In fact he gradually unburdened himself of the grievances of his sect, how they had to conform outwardly to Sunni ways to avoid being driven away from employment Things had distinctly changed for the worse the happy old days at Court were no more It was even becoming doubtful whether the Emperor might not prohibit the coming Muharram procession

Bhim Singh pricked up his ears An idea had flashed

across his brain. Here was his chance of escape if only he could get a suitable disguise. Very carefully he sounded his man. By the gift of two jewels, the price of which would keep Muhammad Ali in luxury for the rest of his life and enable him to travel far out of the Emperor's clutches, Bhim Singh won him over.

Through this intermediary, Bhim Singh was at last enabled to get into touch with Jagat Singh, the captain of his Ranawat escort. He learnt that they had been forbidden to leave the city and were thinking of making a wild dash for it if only they could get hold of their Prince. On Bhim Singh's advice it was arranged that four or five of them should disguise themselves as bud-mashes and steal their own horses. The guards, on hearing whose horses they were, would be only too glad to take a bribe and let them go, for this would reduce the Rajputs' chances of escape. They were to go across the river and wait at a certain rendezvous. This was to be done on the night before the Muharram procession. The others were to disguise themselves and join the procession to the river bank. He himself would be with the procession from the citadel, if the Emperor allowed one to go. In any case, that risk must be taken. As for his own horse he would have to leave it in the citadel, luckily Thunderbolt had gone lame and had been left behind.

Fortunately Aurangzeb did not prohibit the procession. On the tenth night it duly left the Delhi gate, wound along through the streets of that quarter and so out beyond the city confines towards the river. One of the loudest wailers for the deaths of Ali and his two sons was a tall figure with a black beard who beat his breast ever and anon with most convincing grief.

The night was not dark Bhim Singh wondered whether anyone would notice him slipping into the water. The fataha was said over the standards and the tabuts, the ornaments and decorations were taken off the latter—and their wooden frameworks were cast into the water. The standards were then immersed. Incense was burnt, the elegies on the martyrs were recited and the people turned homewards. Loitering behind, the Prince watched his opportunity, slipped noiselessly into the river and began to swim across, under the surface for as long as he could. Unluckily, to the Prince's chagrin, one of the other processionalists, happening to glance back at the river, had detected him.

Arrived at the rendezvous near a small village, he found his men assembled there in joyous spirits. A spare horse had been found for him. They mounted in haste, for Bhim Singh told them that someone had, after all, watched him swimming in the river instead of returning with the others. There was every prospect, therefore, of their flight being detected and a hot pursuit set in motion.

Bhim Singh laughed to himself. 'Now, Raja Shiam, you will know that I am not such a fool as I looked. Alamgir has been outwitted by the stripling. Woe betide me if I ever fall into his hands !'

CHAPTER X

AKBAR'S COMMISSION

'KHAN SAMIN—do thou advise my father not to venture his sacred person within the Girwa To me it looks too much like a trap—this tempting absence of serious opposition ; it reminds me of the crocodile's open mouth We will ourselves go in with fifty thousand men, smash up the idols of Krishna and Eklunga as His Majesty has commissioned us to do, level the shrines with the ground and erect mosques upon the sites But—why detail all this to one who has just come from overrunning Marwar and smashing temples ?'

'Sultan,' replied Tahawwar Khan, one of Aurangzeb's ablest and most trusted commanders, "'tis lucky I finished the job in time to come over to this side of the mountains, and, if he will hearken to my advice once again, prevent the Emperor, in his overweening pride of numbers, running his head into a hornets' nest The Rajput, as you well know, will take on any odds and fight to the bitter end at the bidding of his chief I tell you my expedition over Marwar was no joke Ram Korumdevi and Durgadas, why—for the matter of that—all her vassals put up a tremendous fight 'Twas only my artillery that broke them Even so I lost some guns ; their charges were so desperate'

So it was agreed between Sultan Akbar and Tahawwar

the great Akbar had speedily succumbed. It was, however, all part of the cunning strategy of Rana Raj Singh that these fortresses were not more strongly held.

He was playing the part of the open-mouthed crocodile. His people and all their moveable possessions had been ordered to Kelwa and other villages in the Aravallis. Jai Singh was posted on the northern crests of that range, ready to dash down and harass the foe on either side. Durgadas and the Rahtors were holding the hills to the south of Kumbhalmer and keeping touch with Gujarat, ready to prevent supplies and reinforcements reaching the enemy, should they attempt this difficult route from that rich province. The Rana himself was posted at the intricate Nan defile to the south east of the Girwa, cutting off communications through the difficult Chappan tract of hills and jungles from the Malwa plateau. Here he was in great strength, watching his chance of falling upon the left flank of his mighty antagonists and of threatening their rear should they venture westwards through the valley of Udaipur to the mountains, which he hoped they would do. For this reason he had left so invitingly open the door at the Debari and the Delwara passes. 'A few miles more,' he seemed to say to the Mughal, 'and the riches of the City of Sunrise are yours. Walk in and possess them and work your will whilst you may.'

Tabawwar Khan had no easy task to convince Alamgir that it was the better policy for his Imperial Majesty not to venture into the valley, but rather to wait until it had been secured and then pass in triumphantly to occupy the Rana's beautiful capital. Aurangzeb never lacked courage. He would never have been what he now was had he not shown unflinching bravery in the

many battles against his brothers in their struggle for the throne. Twice had his cause seemed irretrievably lost, but he had stood his ground and refused to turn from the field. Luck had always seconded his brave resolve to face his destiny where he stood.

However, His Majesty was convinced at last. He decided to await events at the Debari pass, with Sultan Aram at Chitor guarding his rear. Akbar and Tahawwar Khan were to go in and possess the valley. The Sultan was instructed to make it his first care to destroy the idol of Krishna now at Nathdwara on the Banas, whilst Tahawwar Khan smashed to pieces Eklinga, the tutelary deity of the Rana's house. Thus should these infidels be taught that in idols is no hope, no succour, but only in the one God whose prophet Muhammad is.

But their Gods did not desert them in their dark hour of need. High on the mountains, on a bluff overlooking the pass of Kumbhalmer, a maiden was standing before the image of Durga Mata with folded hands and uplifted eyes in earnest prayer and supplication to the guardian Goddess who once before, in a vision to her father, by timely warning of danger had helped them to drive away their country's foe.

Premabai was all alone in the shrine. Often had she come here to pray in solitude. The black marble tablets set in the wall of the temple court by pious princes had ever been her constant inspiration. The histories of the Gods inscribed thereon had sustained her simple faith. It was impossible that Deities with such a record of victory should perish at the bidding of a mortal—mighty Emperor though he were, with the whole world at his feet. Within the long hall was the pure marble figure of the Goddess with her numerous family around her.

Flowers had been reverently placed before her. She seemed to be listening to the half-whispered prayers of the devout maiden who spoke so pleadingly.

'O mother of the Gods, succour now thy country in this dark hour. Thou seest how the wicked Mughal has already done much mischief, how he has broken the images of our Gods and destroyed their shrines. Spare this fair land of Mewar such impious sacrilege. Arise! O Mama Devi, arise and help! Oft have I fasted, oft have I prayed, but thou hast not spoken. Give thy true servant a word—a promise. Show me a way to prove my devotion by deeds. Hear me, great Goddess, hear me!'

So long and so imploringly did Premabai plead that she fell into an ecstasy, and therein received an answer to her prayer. Assuming a port that was more than human, the Goddess floated through the still evening air until she rested above the Rana's 'cloud palace' within the citadel on the very peak of the mountain. An unearthly radiance shone about her. Premabai knew now that her sincere devotion was about to be rewarded. Gazing intently at the glorious vision of radiant beauty, she saw a flaming sword flash in the Goddess's hand pointing downwards towards Nathdwara. Letters of fire framed themselves against the rapidly darkening sky as the sword's point moved across. 'God Krishna is in peril. The haughty Mughal comes to seize him. Do thou, my devout worshipper, hasten to his rescue and bring him to my sanctuary.' Such was the message. The vision faded.

When Premabai awoke to a sense of her surroundings the rising moon was filling the shrine with a silvery light. Bowing low before the Goddess she poured out

her gratitude Then she hastened away with all speed to seek her father the Thakur

She found him in earnest talk with Prince Bhim Both looked at her with astonishment, her face was all aglow with unrepressed excitement Breathlessly she gasped out her story

The Prince seized his sword and buckler, exclaiming in his impetuous manner when deeply moved

'By the sun of the sack of Chitor, this shall not be! May all the transgressions of Akbar's mighty host be upon my head if I do not prevent it! Up, Thakur, up, there's no time to lose Sultan Akbar, I know, is in the valley'

The Thakur caught him by the arm as he was darting off towards the gate

'Prince,' said he, 'take thought before you leap into the dark Alone you cannot accomplish your desire Plan out your action first, let those with you know each his appointed task and you may succeed Rashness will lose the day'

The Prince saw the good sense of this and remembered the saying 'Haste makes waste' A few minutes sufficed He was to hasten down the mountain with three hundred men—all the Thakur could spare him of the garrison On his way he was to collect as many Bhil bowmen as he could find withm easy call Bamboo rafts were to be hastily put together, and a long bamboo bier upon which to place the idol—for it was hopeless to think of moving the car Hundreds of men had not been able to move it a few months earlier This had filled all with astonishment Over other sandy or boggy parts the car had been safely, if slowly, dragged, thanks to the Rana's foresight in having tamber felled to place beneath the

wheels But at Nathdwara, on the banks of the Banas, two and twenty miles away from the city, it had defied all their efforts It was clear that this was the spot chosen by the God himself for his future abode So the car was left for the time being where it had stuck Men's thoughts had perforce turned to sterner matters The God was housed in a temporary shrine till better times should come and a temple worthy of him could be built

Along the wooded left bank of the Banas, where the moonlight was flecked with deep shadows, Bhim Singh on one of the Thakur's sure-footed horses moved rapidly but silently along with his cavaliers, one hundred Bhils flitted like ghosts amongst the trees, taking short cuts and keeping up with the horsemen How glad he was that he had taken Salumbar's advice and learnt his way about these foothills A short way below their destination, they had floated two large bamboo rafts that moved rapidly down the stream, propelled by long poles with two men to each pole At a spot chosen by Bhim Singh near a steep part of the right bank, where trees and shrubs came close to the water's edge, the rafts were moored

Two hundred yards away the shrine lay bathed in moonlight Would they reach it in time? Already the long sheltering ridge to the east was swarming with Akbar's men, who had overcome the stout resistance of the *Kanphara Jogi* These ascetic militant monks had put up a good fight, their matchlock fire had held off the enemy for no little time Their commander, posted with two hundred men along the tableland summit of the ridge, had moved his men rapidly from one end to the other to give the impression that the ridge was

strongly held. Thus had he gained valuable time. He trusted that the noise of gunfire would bring someone to his support from across the river. Nor was he disappointed.

It was Premabar's sharp ear that had first detected the sound. She urged on the Prince, who was astonished to see her, for he had no idea that she was coming too. He remonstrated with her. She replied simply that she was but obeying the Goddess's command.

There was no time for further argument. Rapidly they swam their horses across the stream and, lighted by the friendly moon, dashed across through the village to charge the foe. The Muslims did not expect them. Thinking that the matchlock men were the sole defenders of the shrine, they had become careless of their formation. The slaughter amongst their scattered groups was terrific for a short time. On the captured ridge, however, the survivors were soon re-formed and reinforced.

Bhim Singh had no intention of charging the ridge. He wheeled his men about to the shrine. From the low mud-walls a desultory matchlock fire, more noisy than deadly, was kept up by the remnant of the 'split-ear ascetics'. To one side his horsemen were drawn up ready to charge any that attempted to storm the sacred precincts.

On the bamboo litter borne on the shoulders of eight sturdy mountaineers the God was being hurried to the water's edge. A shout arose. Bhim Singh looked round—there to his left came a compact body of Muslim horse two hundred strong charging down to cut off their retreat to the river. Meanwhile his own main body was hotly engaged repelling determined attacks from the village on the further side of the shrine. The Rajputs

were seriously outnumbered. The whole place seemed to swarm with Muslims shouting 'Din, Din'

The Prince whistled thrice, a long shrill whistle, a preconcerted signal that his men were to draw off to gain the left bank as well as they could, each man for himself. He himself, calling aloud upon the God now within a stone's throw of the bank to arouse himself and save them, turned his small force, a score of Ranawat clansmen, to charge and impede the oncoming foe. He did not expect to survive. His faith was not so strong as that of Premabai. He trusted in his own right arm sooner than in any God, save, perhaps, Eklinga his tutelary deity. Krishna, he knew, was nicknamed *Rinchor*, 'abandoner of the field'. He did not really expect help from him.

Yet it came. As they were about to hurl themselves in utter desperation against the foe, many of the latter were seen to reel in their saddles and fall. Volley after volley of deadly arrows rained upon them. So murderous indeed was the arrow hail that, with a wave of his sword, the Prince wheeled his men to one side, charging the now confused mass only when he noticed a lull in the bowmen's attack.

The Muslims had lost their leaders. They could not stand this short-range arrow attack any longer. They turned and fled. The Prince and his men rode rapidly down to the water. Along the bank he found the Bhil contingent of the 'lords of the passes' drawn up at short intervals and directed by the intrepid Premabai. She it was who had brought them across by swimming, and saved the day at the most critical moment.

On to the raft the hero was lowered. The bearers jumped down after it, followed by the priests and by

Bhum Singh, whose horse had been too severely wounded to be able to swim across. The enemy had rallied again and were wildly firing matchlocks and discharging arrows upon the swimming Rajputs. Many, alas ! never reached the farther bank.

With a splash one of the pole men at the stern fell dead into the water. The other man was losing his balance and about to follow him. Bhum Singh sprang to the pole and steadied him. Together they poled with all their might. The raft was beginning to gather speed—but the stream was against them.

Into the pole between his hands an arrow struck with a ringing metallic sound. Bhum Singh looked up. There on the bank an archer was standing, a few short yards away, aiming another shaft straight at him.

The Prince laughed aloud. It amused him to think that after all he should meet his death as a coolie poling a raft along. He laughed still louder at the ridiculous somersault the archer made as he came tumbling down from the lofty bank with a splash into the clear water beneath. An arrow was sticking through his ribs under the arm. Again had Premabai, who had jumped onto the other raft, come to the rescue of the man she now adored.

A little farther up stream they crossed to the opposite bank. The rafts were abandoned, and the God and his rescuers were soon lost to view amidst the trees.

CHAPTER XI

A GAME OF CHESS IS INTERRUPTED

THE Sultan Muhammad Akbar had taken possession of the Rana's empty city. His men had plundered to their hearts' content. They did not know that Eklunga had sworn through the mouth of his high priest that none of this ill-gotten loot should leave the valley. They were at their ease, roaming through the deserted palaces. This was a bivouac not to be left in a hurry. Word had been sent to Alamgir that he might safely enter.

Moved by curiosity to see the abode of his grandfather Shah Jahan, when as Prince Khurram in revolt against his father Jahangir he was given asylum by the Rana of Udaipur, Akbar had rowed across to the Jagmandir on one of the wooded isles in the middle of Lake Pichola. He was accompanied by Tahawwar Khan. Disembarking, they passed through silent orange and lemon groves shaded by graceful palmyra and dark cypress trees. The gardens were gay with parterres of flowers, here and there was a wide-spreading tamarind. A little paradise of quiet beauty.

Together they ascended the marble stairs to the splendid building beneath its lofty dome crowned with a gilded crescent. In the court they passed the tomb of a Muhammadan saint. Beneath the dome within the

spacious hall they saw a stately throne sculptured from a single block of marble with quadriform female figures supporting it. The floor and the walls were inlaid with lovely mosaics.

On a marble seat near the entrance they sat down and for a while gazed without a word at the chaste beauty around them. On the sister-isle they could see the lovely Jagrnvas, the water-palace of the Ranas. Through the trees came glimpses of white marble cupolas and columns. At the water's edge the eye could distinguish the colonnaded refectories and baths where the Ranas would sleep off their midday opium and, awaking, listen drowsily to the tales of the bards whilst the delicious perfumes of the myriad lotus blossoms that covered the wide waters of the lake were wafted across to them. The Aravallis loomed large in the distance.

'Khan Sahib,' began the Sultan, breaking at last the lengthy silence, 'what shall I say to my august father? Krishna has escaped me. 'Twas a daring coup, methought I spied a familiar figure leading them. I am glad he did not fall into my hands. My father would have misused him cruelly. Yet, gladly would I have learned how he broke out of his gilded cage—what wings bore him away.'

'That, Sultan,' replied Tahawwar Khan, 'is easily answered. Did you not hear that a man was seen swimming across the river on the night of the Muharram procession? Truly, a pity that your august father is so tolerant to fellow-Muslims. He was altogether too patient with those Shahs.'

'Ah, well, the young man played his part skilfully and deserved success. But come, I have yet to learn how you fared against Eklings.'

'Fared badly, horribly badly. My face and neck still feel the stings of his guardian insects.'

'Insects? Well, I suppose a handful of fighting monks may fitly be called insects, but I see no wounds or scratches on your face and neck'

'Nay, they were worse than a few monks. They swarmed in myriads like locusts darkening the sky. But listen, I shall tell you all in order. I first attempted the entrance to the narrow valley from the north, but found the road passing through a deep gorge guarded by a strong gate. The soldier monks were ready for us, heaps of loose rocks were piled up on the heights overlooking the roads. It was a death-trap. So, detaching some men to keep these monks in check I made a long détour to the other side. There I found an easier road, but a massive portal barred the way to the shrine. A couple of elephants soon butted that in for me. That should teach them to put spikes on their gates in future. At the shrine itself some three hundred yards further down the valley the old priest stood waving his arms and calling down curses. I told my gunners to put a few cannon balls into the temple and give him good cause to dance about like a lunatic.

'That was my mistake. The noise of it disturbed the black masses that were hived on the rocks of the gorge to the north. Down they swarmed—the very air hissing like escaping steam from huge cauldrons. Elephants, horses and men were thrown into utter confusion. A tremendous stampede, I can assure you! With our tunics over our heads we bolted out of that accursed ravine at top speed, followed for miles by those little devils of the air. Some of my men threw themselves into tanks and got drowned for their pains—not easy to

turn into a fish all at once, as soon as a man's head came up it was black with bees. Now, Sultan, what shall I say to my imperial master ?'

Akbar shrugged his shoulders and replied—'I don't know. We are both in the same plight. Verily the task was as a mountain hidden behind a straw. Easy it looked but hard it proved. I don't like this tampering with other folk's Gods. If they are loyal subjects, that should suffice a ruler. This is a senseless war. I have little heart for it. Now let us get back to the Rana's palace ere 'tis dark. I have some new openings in chess to teach you.'

For some hours they had sat absorbed in their game. Akbar was in the act of moving his 'Vizier' and about to say 'Shah Māt' when a sudden loud noise assailed their ears. The guns on Mount Ekingarh, overlooking the city on the south, had opened fire. Both men jumped up, upsetting the chess-board in their haste, and ran out on to the balcony. From all sides through the darkness confused noises reached them. A horseman came galloping on to the terrace, and discerning their figures outlined against the lights behind them, called out 'Sultan Sahib, the Rajputs are upon us!'

They looked at each other in astonishment. Confident of their strong position and large numbers, with the northern and eastern entrances blocked by their own armies outside and the south-eastern pass blocked from within, they had felt quite safe on those sides. On the west strong pickets had been posted—this was the vulnerable quarter. Their dispositions had been good, and all would have been well had better discipline prevailed amongst their troops. But officers and men had been too confident of security, and too much inclined to

take things easily for a spell after their long and arduous marches from Bengal and the tough fighting at the eastern frontier fortresses

There was not much moonlight, and the Mughals were at a disadvantage in not knowing the *terrain* so well as their attackers. The Sultan and Tahawwar Khan dashed down to the body-guard lines, and mustering the body-guard troops and other contingents within the city walls issued forth, the Sultan from the Suraj Pol on the east and Tahawwar Khan from the Hathu Pol on the north. Fortunately for them they had distributed their guns amongst the chain of small fortresses guarding all approaches to the city walls. They had no reason to fear an attack on the city itself. The Rana would not like to see his palaces knocked about. But they did fear the loss of men and equipment in the several large camps formed outside. It was to the two most important of these that they were hastening. Their arrival put heart into the isolated groups who were fighting desperately in the ruins of their camps. Charge after charge was made; the Rajputs were held in check. Some sort of order was restored, and the broken troops drew off to the shelter of the city walls.

It was Jai Singh and his brother who, coming down from the mountains with a force of fifteen thousand men, had taken the enemy outposts completely by surprise. They had overrun them easily and had pushed on to attack the forces blocking the ingress through the Nai defile. So successful had they been in throwing them into confusion that the Rana had had an easy march in. Attacked on both sides by forces of unknown strength, and not able to use their guns to advantage in the uncertain light, the Muslims had broken and fled back to

their camps with the Rajputs close on their heels Impetuously the clans charged into the camps, and wrought havoc until the troops from the city held them in check

The Rawat of Salumbar had gone with a strong detachment to capture the fortified hill of Eldingarh He had found it too strongly held It was the guns of this fort that had first aroused the chess players to a sense of danger

In a brief council of war the Rajput leaders decided that it was impracticable to attack their own city Street fighting was not at all to their liking Until Eldingarh was taken, the enemy guns could do untold damage to their palaces on the ridge and within the city Their forces were little more than half those of Akbar in number It was only by surprise that they had gained their success hitherto They had no guns except the few they had captured, and these they could not use for lack of trained gunners It were better to draw off before daylight disclosed to the enemy their inferiority in numbers Akbar must be left in the dark upon this point Chondawat Rawat Rutten Singh of Salumbar with a smile agreed that it would put him into a curious position to find himself attacking the Suraj Pol which it was his special privilege to defend to the death

So, in spite of some ardent spirits flushed with victory who, with true Rajput impetuosity, wished to continue the fight, it was settled that they should gather together the very considerable booty that had already fallen into their hands and draw off to the eastern barrier of their valley The three passes were to be closely blockaded from within to prevent Aurangzeb forcing his way through They would take the risk of being caught

between two fires and would wait and see what Akbar would do. If he decided to move westwards into the mountains, he would be delivering himself into their hands

Tahawwar Khan urged the Sultan to fight his way back to the imperial forces beyond the passes. But Akbar, fearing that his troops had been too much shaken and disorganised, and quite uncertain as to the numbers of the Rajputs between him and his father, rejected the advice and determined to effect a junction with the army in occupation of Marwar. It was to prove a fatal mistake

However, all went well at first. The troops were reorganised, the guns removed from the fortresses and the whole force put into a fair marching order. The loss of much of their camp equipment was severely felt, but the rainy season was yet some months ahead, and there was every hope of replenishment before the weather broke. The sick and wounded were left behind. No harm would come to them from their chivalrous foe.

Tahawwar Khan was in command of the strong rear-guard but was not attacked. The Rajputs had no wish to impede their westward movement. In some bottle-necked valley the whole army would soon be an easy prey.

To Gogunda, then, some twenty miles north-west of the city they were reluctantly leaving, the Muslims directed their march, hoping to cross the mountains by the Sadri Pass some six miles to the south of the Hathigura Nal or Elephant Pass below Kumbhalmer.

CHAPTER XII

RAM RUKKI, OR THE BRACELET-BROTHER

For many months past Rani Korumdevi had been importuned by Durgadas to remove herself and her infant son to a more distant and more secret refuge in a Jain monastery on Mount Abu. She would not listen. Kumbhalgarh seemed to her the strongest fortress ever built. Rana Kumbha's stronghold defied capture. Behind its massive walls and towers, seven hundred feet above the pass that it commanded, and behind its seven gates, on the very pinnacle of the mountain, the Cloud Palace of the Rana was surely far beyond the reach of any foe however strong. 'Where,' she argued, 'could a safer refuge be found?' By direct attack perhaps it was impregnable, but to slow starvation it might succumb as many another stronghold had done. That was Durgadas' constant reply. Driven out of Marwar, with the imperial armies approaching in overwhelming strength on all sides, the Rani had at last given in.

To Mount Abu then she had been escorted whilst the hills were still untrodden by the invader's foot. There, with many misgivings, she had left her Ajit in the care of a trusty nurse. But she herself had utterly refused to stay behind or to part with her beloved companion the Princess Ambalika.

On their return, within a dozen miles of their destination, they found their road blocked by the army of Sultan Akbar, which was slowly penetrating through the foothills. To make a dash for it Durgadas considered too risky. He must wait till Jai Singh's forces returned. The Thakur of Ghanerao sent word from Kumbhalmer that his daughter Premabai was ready to show him a most secret hiding-place in a hill temple cut high in the rocky side of a narrow ravine a few miles south of the Sadri Pass. This refuge was approachable only by a steep winding path and was well hidden by shrubs and trees. A safer spot and a more convenient one for a temporary refuge could not be found.

The Rani agreed. Premabai accordingly led them to the spot. Every arrangement possible was made for the royal ladies' comfort and a small guard was posted near by. It was undesirable to attract undue attention. The guard was placed there to prevent mischief from the wild mountaineers. These mountain tribes would plunder friend or foe alike if they had a chance to do so. Though they were now fighting for the Rajputs, the latter, knowing their unscrupulous nature, never trusted them.

Meanwhile Durgadas and the other chieftains who had formed the escort rode on to Kumbhalmer. News soon reached them that Jai Singh and his brother were returning on a route more to the north of the Muslims. They were not to prevent Akbar's entry to the mountain pass but to allow him to get well in, and then their combined forces could capture him and his whole army.

Never for a moment was it thought possible that treachery would imperil the Rani. But there was a traitor in their camp. Thakur Goculdas of Banera, a

Rahtor, allowed feelings of wounded vanity to overcome his loyalty. A man of overweening self-conceit, he had aspired to the hand of Princess Ambahika. He and his contingent had, with the Rana's consent, relieved the Rao of Bedla and his men in the duty of forming part of the Rani's body-guard. From a distance he had worshipped the fair Ambahika. In time he had found opportunities, in the performance of his duties, to speak to her. Etiquette on the march through the jungles and over the mountains had of necessity been relaxed. Her shyness he mistook for sure signs of affection returned. But Ambahika could not bear the sight of him. The Rani disliked him because of his addiction to opium, over-indulgence in which had once caused an inconvenient delay in their journey.

A few days previously he had formally requested the Rani for the hand of her ward. That astonished lady had given him a curt refusal. The memory of her manner and her few scornful words still rankled. Overcome by a sense of deep insult to his rank and lineage, he nursed the bitter spirit of revenge. In spite of the haughty queen he would still make Ambahika his bride. Had she not shown unequivocal signs of affection? She on her side would not resist capture.

Such were his thoughts and such his feelings as he made his solitary way towards Akbar's approaching army. He fell in with the rear-guard. Of this he was glad, had he met Akbar himself he might have been tempted to betray the Rajput designs. His treachery was not so black as that. His real desire was to avenge himself upon the Rani alone. The future could then take care of itself.

Goculdas advanced boldly. He did not wish to be

taken as a spy. But the sentries would not let him pass until he had thrown down his weapons. Unarmed, he was escorted to the commander's tent. Tahawwar Khan was for some time very doubtful of his good faith. Not until he had taken the most solemn oath of 'The sin of the sack of Chitor,' would the Mushm leader pay serious attention to what he was saying.

'Khan Sahib, consider what you gain by so small an effort. Three or four hundred men with a few small guns such as the swivel-pieces you carry on the camels could capture the ladies within a very short time. This excursion to a spot not much more than half-a-dozen miles to the south of your main route need not upset your rear-guard dispositions. The possession of such important hostages might prove invaluable.'

'I wonder if I can get anything out of this fellow,' reflected Tahawwar Khan. 'Why does he dwell on the value of hostages?' Aloud he said, 'Hostages? What do we want with hostages? Alamgir has marched into the valley of Udaipur and has relieved us of the pleasant duty of garrisoning that lovely place. Trust an Emperor for having an easy time of it. 'Tis we poor soldiers that have to do all the tedious marching and counter-marching. Besides we do not make war on women.'

With this kind of bluff did he try to draw out the Thakur to give reasons why hostages might prove invaluable. But the Thakur, realising that he had gone too far, and not desirous of betraying the whole cause of his country, replied, 'Well, Khan Sahib, your news is more up-to-date. Remember I have just come from a distant post and know not exactly how matters stand. It was by the merest chance I lighted upon their hiding-

place I have come direct to seek you But will not the Emperor rejoice exceedingly to get Prince Ajit into his guardianship ? My fellow-countrymen are altogether too suspicious of His Majesty and only too ready to accuse him of all sorts of crimes. I should like to see the Prince raised, as his father was, to high honour and distinction in the Emperor's Court'

Thus, in spite of his oath, Thakur Goculdas added lying to treachery so great was the passion urging him on and so great the fear lest Tahawwar Khan should not, as he had said, 'make war upon women' and so cheat him of his hopes Unsuccessful treachery is a bitter pill to swallow Infatuated man ! What would he do when Tahawwar Khan discovered that Ajit was not there ? Could he convince the Muslim that he had no reason to suppose that the infant Prince was not with his mother ? Could he expect the Rani not to denounce him as one of her escort to a distant hiding-place ? Where this might be, she would, of course, utterly refuse to disclose Yet, her word or his, which would be believed ? Rapidly he had decided in his mind that he must take this risk

Still Tahawwar Khan was doubtful of him The reason the Thakur had given seemed rather insufficient, for, after all, his allegiance was not to Jodhpur but to Mewar He wondered what might be his ulterior motive Piqued by curiosity and thinking that, if he humoured him, he might prevail upon the traitor unguardedly to loosen his tongue and give out valuable information, he consented It would only be a few hours' job No harm in trying And if the Thakur was leading him into an ambush, woe betide him ! Instant death would be his portion He would take special precautions

against falling into an ambush. He would send out his best scouts on all sides.

Reflecting thus, he gave orders for four hundred men and four camels with swivel-guns to be ready to move in half-an-hour's time. The scouts were sent out immediately in the direction indicated by the Thakur.

Still unarmed, Goculdas led the little force up hill and down dale for seven miles in a south-westerly direction. The march was difficult, for he led them through the jungle as much as possible, not wishing to attract notice. The men had often to dismount and walk their horses. The camels grunted disconsolately. Sandy plains they understood, but where was the sense of trying to make them climb like goats? More than once they lay down and refused to budge. It was only the lighting of little fires that brought them to their feet, with hair scorched or tails singed.

All unconscious of approaching danger, Premabai was wandering a mile or two from the ravine, in search of a certain wild flower that the Ram was so fond of, when two Bhil bowmen came running up to tell her that a party of the enemy was working its way through the jungle in their direction.

Following the bowmen, Premabai from a lofty rock at length espied the Muslims crossing an open glade. She saw their camels with the guns. Altogether she reckoned their probable strength to be about five to six hundred men.

Calling on the Bhils to summon their fellows to their aid and take post at the head of the ravine awaiting the signal to shoot, Premabai dashed back to the rock-temple to give warning. The small guard was assembled and, on hearing the news, with the fumes of their daily opium

stall upon them, they fell to embracing one another as men taking a final farewell. Thus, Premabai knew, was a good sign that they would fight to the death. Not that she ever doubted it. Still, she was rejoiced to see that they were sufficiently awake to the seriousness of the situation.

With the Ram's consent, Ambalika proposed to send a silken bracelet to Prince Bhim Singh, whom they thought to be somewhere in their neighbourhood by this time. Whom could she send? The family priest, the usual messenger on such an errand, would lose his way. No one had such knowledge of this intricate part of the mountain as Premabai. Coily and hesitatingly Ambalika asked her to go.

When Premabai understood what the mission was her feelings were at war. O cruel fate! That the man she loved should receive such a mark of esteem from another! Why had she herself not thought of making Bhim Singh her bracelet-brother, her champion? She supposed it was because she was so accustomed to look after herself. Thanks to an indulgent father she had lived a free and independent open-air life, and had not been cooped up in a zenana. Ambalika, on the contrary, had had a sheltered existence. She was a timid little thing, too. Was she altogether worthy of the Prince? Premabai never realised that men so often fall in love with their opposites.

But when she remembered the Prince's open though unspoken love for the fair girl, in her own great love for him, she pushed these ungenerous thoughts aside and accepted the dangerous mission. She hoped she might find him, but she was doubtful. However, she could at any rate bring a rescue party from Kumbhalmer. How she trusted they would be in time!

Away then she sped around the head of the ravine where the Bhils were already silently gathering. Foot-sore and bleeding from her wild scramble through the jungle, after what seemed an eternity of time, she came, at last, within sight of Sadri Pass.

The Rajput chieftains were out on the hills surveying the pass and arranging where to place their contingents to the best advantage to give Akbar the warmest reception he had ever received from an enemy. Already the Sultan's advance-guard were filing into the pass. Not a sound was made by those watching them from the heights. Soon they would have the reward of patience.

By a lucky chance the weary Premabai came upon the very man she was seeking. She told him of the Rani's danger, and with an air of indifference she was far from feeling gave him the bracelet from the Princess.

How his eyes lighted up when he saw it! Reverently he bound it round his wrist with the little coloured tassels hanging down. Hastily he explained to the chieftains near him what had happened, so that they might fill up the positions assigned to him. With all the men he could muster on the spot, close upon three hundred, he hastened on foot with Premabai to the rescue. Horses would impede them in this difficult cross-country race.

Well did he remember the rock-temple which he had come upon accidentally in his roamings over the hills. How lucky for him that he had used that time to such advantage. His knowledge of short cuts was better even than that of Premabai, the distance was thereby reduced by nearly two miles. This was a boon to the exhausted girl by his side.

During Premabai's absence the Rani and Ambalika were in great danger. Peering through the bushes they

watched the approach of the enemy, and distinctly saw the Thakur of Banera pointing out to the Muslim leader the exact position of their retreat. The Bhils did their best to prevent the Muslims bringing their little brass guns into action, but, in spite of some casualties, the Muslim soldiers forming the escort to the guns succeeded in driving the bowmen away and in holding them off at a safe distance. The four small guns were dragged up the rocky ledges of the face of the ravine directly opposite the cave-temple and opened a terrifying fire. The ladies retreated to the interior of the cave to avoid the splinters of rock that were now flying about at its entrance and even occasionally finding their way inside. The few Rajput defenders were valiantly holding the rugged path to the cave itself and repulsing the desperate attempts of the Muslims to sweep them aside.

The Ram was kept fully informed of the progress of the fight by her faithful servants. She realised that her escort could not hold out much longer against the determined attacks of the enemy on her side of the ravine, whilst they were also losing men from the guns that had begun to enfilade them from the other side. She was, however, determined that her beloved ward should not fall into Muslim hands. Accordingly, summoning the Captain of the escort, she told him of a ruse that she had thought of as a last desperate measure of gaining time. He was to take a message to the Muslim commander saying that she would come down to him if he ceased fire and allowed her to get her paliki-bearers together. She would trust to his word that nothing but honourable treatment should be shown to her, the widow of a famous soldier, if she came down from her retreat.

Tabawwar Khan, not noticing the omission of any reference to the Rani's women nor the ambiguous way in which the Rani's promise was worded, but only too glad to meet with such apparently easy success in his little excursion, readily gave the required pledge, and at the same time requested the Rani's envoy not to allow too much delay.

On the return of her messenger the Rani ordered the men of her escort to fetch her five palkis from their hiding-places. Her instructions were that an extra number of bearers should be detailed to each palki, the enemy, she declared, would suspect nothing from the unusual number because of the steepness of the path and the consequent difficulty in conveying palkis safely down it. Three armed men were to squeeze into each palki except the last, wherein she herself would sit with two men. The weapons of the bearers should also be packed away out of sight in each palki. Meanwhile the Captain of the escort should hold himself responsible for taking Ambahka and her attendants unobserved out of the cave-temple and guiding them to safety.

The Rani's orders were being duly carried out when the Prince and Premabai reached the end of the ravine. Not a Bhil was to be seen. On the side of the ravine opposite the cave the brass guns were being taken down to the bottom, the gunners and guards juggling carelessly down the steep track as if all was over. Bhim Singh's heart sank within him. And then to their horror the rescuers saw five palkis issue from the cave and begin their difficult descent down the narrow winding path through the bushes.

Bhim Singh was for dashing down upon the column forthwith, but Premabai's sharp eyes had caught the

glint of what looked like a shield or a spear point in the last of the palkis. Eagerly she pointed it out to the Prince. In a little while he saw it too, and then he noticed that there seemed to be more bearers than usual to each palki. It was clearly a ruse. Inside the palkis were armed men, and no doubt spare arms for the bearers also. He decided to allow them to get right into the middle of the Muslims at the mouth of the ravine before hurling his men to the attack from the lower end of the hill where he stood. There it was much less precipitous and easier for a sudden swift onset.

He told his men what he proposed to do. They worked their way most cautiously under cover to the lower end of their hill and waited breathlessly to see the rude surprise that was about to be sprung upon the enemy from the palkis, now almost at the bottom.

They saw the commander step forward most politely, doubtless with words of courteous excuse upon his lips. And then they saw him spring back, draw his sword and engage furiously with the armed warriors who had leaped out of the palkis.

Men were falling right and left. Shouts and curses broke the stillness. The few Rajputs were being surrounded. Not a man would have survived had not Bhim Singh and his men burst upon their antagonists with the wildest of war-whoops.

The struggle was short but intense. It was only ended when Tahanwar Khan and a score of others, running back and mounting their horses, repeatedly charged the Rajputs. They were now at a disadvantage. Bhim Singh fell wounded by a sword-cut in his left thigh. His men picked him up and retreated slowly, fiercely fighting, to the scrub jungle on the side of the ravine.

Tahawwar Khan had had enough. He had not bargained for a pitched battle. Dragging off the unlucky Goculdas, who was to experience great difficulty in convincing him that it was no preconcerted ambush, he retired. His retreat was unmolested after a mile or two.

When the enemy had gone out of sight, the intrepid Ram stepped out of her palki and moved quickly after Bhim Singh. Having seen him fall and bleed profusely she was now extremely anxious about him. To her great relief she found him sitting propped up against a rock lending a helping hand to a soldier who was skilfully bandaging his thigh for him. His surprise at seeing the Ram was great indeed, but not greater than his gratitude for her heartfelt thanks and her tender solicitude. When he learnt that she had been all this while ensconced in the last of the palkis he was astomshed and angry at her men for leaving her alone and not staying beside her till death. She told him, however, that like good soldiers they had but obeyed her orders, because, having seen that the Muslims had had enough of it and were likely to beat a retreat, she knew that the danger was over, for they would never dream of her actual presence if all the palkis were abandoned where they had been placed. Not one would guess that she was absolutely fulfilling her promise to come down. Certainly, she admitted, it had been touch and go, but, at all events, her beloved Ambahika would now have reached safety. On hearing these words the Prince thought within himself that nowhere in the world was there likely to be shown such courage, unselfishness and devotion as had been displayed by the gallant lady before him. After the men had returned from molesting Tahawwar Khan's

retreat, the Rani, the Princess and her other selected men were put into the palanquin and taken up to the cave.

Ambalika and the Captain had started in their flight on hearing the retreat of the fugitives and in their immense relief had seen that retreat and were glad that the enemy were retreating. They hurried back to the cave. Ambalika's joy at seeing the Rani side at her sound was unbounded, her distress at Bhim Singh's wound was very great. With tears in her eyes, she warmly thanked her champion, and, turning to Purnaban, who had not spoken a word after taking her way round the head of the ravine to the cave, as soon as she had seen the last of the fighting, the Princess embraced her again and again and thanked her in broken accents of sincere gratitude.

During the short period of his convalescence Bhim Singh heard the whole story of the fight in the ravine before his arrival. On his expressing great astonishment at one of the leading nobles of Mewar turning traitor, the Rani was obliged to tell him of her refusal of the Thakur's request for the Princess's hand. The greatness of his own love for Ambalika enabled the Prince to understand a little how this black treachery was conceived. He found himself actually pitying the crafty noble

CHAPTER XIII

THE RANA'S STAR IN THE ASCENDANT

(1) *Mountain Warfare*

IN one of the rock-cut cells formerly the abode of Jain monks by the side of their temple, Bhim Singh had rested his wounded limb for four days. He was of tough fibre and in excellent health, his wound was healing rapidly under the tender care of the royal ladies. He loved being near his Princess, but his fighting spirit made him fret exceedingly at his enforced absence from the scene of action six short miles away.

Sultan Muhammad Akbar was in sore straits. He had been allowed to penetrate unmolested into the heart of the pass only to find himself completely hemmed in. At the further end of this long *Nal*, the natural rampart of a rocky ridge had been barricaded by a stockade of felled timber. Jai Singh was blocking up the entrance. All Tahawwar Khan's strenuous efforts to cut his way out had been foiled by the Prince. Each time the intrepid Muslim commander had been driven back to complete the confusion and distress within. From the crests on both sides the Rajputs were hurling down death and destruction. They were above the reach of gunfire. Akbar, indeed, after wasting much ammunition, had hidden his guns in the deserted Jain temples among the

accepted the stipulations contained therein, and immediately gave the necessary orders

When the conditions had been fulfilled, Bhum Singh announced his intention of accompanying them on Akbar's elephant as far as Jilwarra. The Sultan declared himself overjoyed to have the pleasure of his company again.

'Prince,' he remarked, as they were leaving the pass, 'you played a pretty trick upon us at Delhi, everyone, even my astute father, misread your character.'

'You yourself did not, Sultan, of that I am sure. I thank you for your generosity in not betraying me. How did your father take the news?'

'As he always does—without moving a muscle or betraying the least emotion unless to one or two of his very intimate associates. Even to them he is most often an unsolvable riddle. But to me he said "No matter, we shall soon catch him again." Nevertheless, I know he was annoyed at his astuteness, that thinks of everything, having overlooked that way of escape. But come now, tell me, was it not you that so daringly snatched Krishna out of my clutches that night?'

'Let us rather put it the other way about—Krishna snatched me out of your clutches.'

'Verily and so he did. You were within an ace of being captured by the flank attack I sent against you. We had no idea of being outflanked ourselves; no idea that you had posted skilled bowmen on the nearer bank.'

'Well, neither did I, to tell you the truth. That was the work of a devotee, the daughter of Thakur Gopinath of Ghanerao.'

'Was that really so? How then can my father ever

least exploit to the skies After I had slain my first wild boar, you would have imagined, as you listened to them, that no boars had ever been killed before '

Thus they beguiled the way with friendly conversation until Jilwarra was reached and the Prince took his leave.

He had not proceeded far on his return journey when he heard a familiar voice hailing him

' Prince, if you wish to see how my father manages a fight, come quickly up this way '

The Prince turned his horse and, going as quickly as his wound allowed him, joined Premabai, who guided him to the crest of the hill that formed one side of the very long and narrow Daisun Pass

Together they watched the pitiless annihilation of Dilr Khan and his troops who were hastening from Marwar to the relief of Sultan Akbar Bikram Solanki Rao, of Rupnagar, and Gopinath Rahtor, Thakur of Ghanerao, had moved to meet him and had inveigled him into this dangerous pass

' Here is a case,' thought Bhim Singh, ' of " a recall of the troops from that region " It is as well Alamgir has forbidden the writing of history ! '

(2) *The Battle of the Berach*

Nor was this the last disaster that befell Alamgir in the earlier months of the year 1690 before the rains broke and suspended operations for a while The Rana had been watching the Emperor and his son Sultan Azam, whose armies occupied the space between the Debari Pass and Ohitor Aurangzeb should have sent Azam to attack the Rana, and risked another battle in the valley whilst Hai Singh's forces were in the

mountains pursuing Akbar His own army was strong enough to ensure the safety of his communications with his base at Ajmer For some reason or other he chose to leave the Rana unmolested until it was too late

The Rana decided to take the initiative He waited a sufficient time to allow the victorious Jai Singh, Durgadas and the other chieftains on the Aravallis to come down and join him in the Udaipur valley He rejoiced to see the captured guns and gunners, who willingly enough transferred their services to him In a pitched battle their aid would be invaluable

He had determined to give battle and continue the tale of Mewar's successes 'Killing the third boar' is how he expressed it He reminded his chiefs of the good omens of their Ahairea festival in the previous year Everyone was confident of further success

Aurangzeb's position was very strong It stretched from the Udaisagar, the lake that Rana Uda Singh, the founder of Udaipur, had formed by throwing a dam across a little stream in a gorge two miles south of the Debari Pass, for some miles along the northern bank of the river Berach that has its source in this lake In the dry season the Berach was a very intermittent stream Nevertheless, its bed of heavy sand was an obstacle To the north of the river the country was fairly open and undulating, but it was covered with low scrub, intersected by numerous nullahs and dotted about with outcrops of broken rock The many mud-walled villages could be made formidable little forts

When Aurangzeb learnt that the Rana was gathering his clans to attack him, he took all due precautions To the rear of his right flank he posted a strong force to block the exit from Debari The hills and the lake

would prevent any formidable movement of enemy troops on the west. On his left flank he had Azam's army with scattered detachments keeping open the line to Ohtor. He moved out of camp and drew up his line of battle on the low ridges behind the little river. Out-flanking tactics on the enemy's part he judged to be impracticable. Convinced that the only attack possible was a frontal one, he waited for several days in expectation of it.

The Rana carefully reconnoitred his enemy's position. From a coign of vantage in the hills surrounding the lake his scouts could gain a fair idea of Alamgir's dispositions.

On the low ridge commanding the river bed, and the only practicable crossing thereabouts for large bodies of men, they saw his line of artillery in position. As far as they could judge there were some forty guns of the heavy ordnance that was drawn by bullock teams or elephants and about thirty lighter pieces of horse-artillery. What they did not see was that all these pieces were linked together by chains of iron to bar the entrance of cavalry between them.

Immediately behind this formidable line they noticed many camels lying down, and guessed that they were part of the dromedary corps mounting the 'little wasps' or swivel-guns, some dozens of which Jai Singh had recently captured. On the irregular rising ground behind these camels they caught sight of what looked like red bamboo staves. Bhim Singh was able to tell his father that he recollected having seen at Delhi the muskets sometimes covered with red cloth to protect them from rust when not in use. Evidently then the main body of musketeers was posted here. Bodies of horse were seen moving hither and thither and some

elephants also. The cavalry, however, were obviously mostly on the flanks or forming part of the reserves with the Emperor's body-guard. It was considered highly probable that Alamgir had put all his available artillery in the front line.

Such were the formidable dispositions of the Mughal army that lay before him, as far as the Rana could learn. It was a mighty host not far short of a hundred thousand men, and he proposed to attack it frontally with a force inferior by many thousands! But success in Oriental warfare, as history shows, did not by any means always lie with the big battalions. The Rajputs were fighting for hearth and home; their whole hearts were in the struggle. Their courage and élan, stimulated by recent successes, were destined to carry them through. They did not know, on that memorable day, when they were beaten.

It proved a most desperate battle. Fortune swayed this way and that throughout the long burning day. When all seemed over and the Rajputs were being driven back, apparently for the last time, with all their hopes of victory shattered beyond repair, the tide turned with dramatic suddenness.

At earliest dawn, hoping to catch the enemy asleep, the Rana opened the battle. During the hours of darkness he had brought up most of his guns, fifteen pieces of heavy ordnance and fifteen horse-guns, to his side of the river. His horsemen were massed behind them out of effective range. Between them and the guns in a depression of the ground he had posted strong contingents of Bhil and Mera bowmen, to support the gunners lest by any unlikely chance the enemy should take the offensive.

As flanking guards to his few precious guns, he had placed several hundreds of the *Kanphara Jogr*, the militant Gosains with their matchlocks, in nullahs and behind rocks. His guns barked a greeting across the river. Soon came the reply. Cannon balls ploughed the sand. The enemy shooting was distinctly bad, that of the Rana's gunners was not much better. The fact was that these mercenary foreigners were altogether too tender of their late boon companions. It was customary to open a battle with a cannonade if one had any guns to speak of, the noise was supposed to be terrifying and to justify the waste of good ammunition.

So, until they saw another target, they aimed badly. It was only by accident that one or two guns on either side were put out of action. The Rana, not realising the cause of this bad shooting, moved his cavalry forward towards the river bed. But the gunners' aim now became too deadly, and they had to retreat again to a safe distance with very considerable losses.

It was clear that at any moment the superior gunfire of his enemy could silence most of the Rana's guns, were the former obliged to fight in greater earnest to escape drastic punishment from their master the Emperor. At present Alamgir was too far in the rear to notice much. The Rana realised that, until the enemy guns were disturbed from an unexpected quarter, he could never take his men across in the face of them without unnecessarily high loss.

Accordingly he instructed Mokham Saktawat, Subbul Singh Chauhan, Rao of Bedla, and Berru Sal Puar of Brijoli, three of the leading nobles of Mewar, to take a force of thirty thousand men, a dozen camel-guns and the remaining five of the captured horse-guns, now being

held in reserve, five miles to the east. There they were to cross the river at all costs and ride in upon the enemy's left flank. They were not to use the guns to effect a crossing unless absolutely obliged. The opposition was not likely to be very strong so far out on the flank. When their diversion began to take effect he would bring over his main forces.

This movement was not detected. It was skilfully carried out, little bodies of horse moving off at intervals and taking all the cover afforded by trees and nullahs that they could find. The kettle-drums with them were silent, but on the other flank of the Rana's force they were being vigorously beaten as large groups were seen to be moving westwards to the lake.

This movement Alamgir from his elephant noticed, as he was intended to do. Accordingly he moved his cavalry to his right flank as if to meet them. The Rana himself then made a feint attack, apparently intending to try a second chance of crossing in front of the guns.

And so the morning wore on, with harmless manoeuvres of this nature. Alamgir felt secure enough. Even the rash and impetuous Rajputs, thought he, were daunted. Their cavalry had thought better of attempting his right flank. On that side, at all events, they were not likely to do him much harm.

He did not know that Bhim Singh, at his own earnest entreaty, had been allowed to try a forlorn chance on that flank. Thousands of mountaineers and eight hundred Gosains had been sent with him during the night to the forest-clad hills encircling the lake. His plan was to move secretly round on the farther side of these hills and watch for the moment when he could most effectively fall upon the enemy's right flank. His father had told

him of his plan, to be put into operation if necessary, to hoodwink the Emperor by ostentatiously moving his cavalry towards the lake as if to attempt an attack on that side and then, apparently thinking better of it, as ostentatiously withdrawing them. Thereby Alamgir would be lulled into a false security. Bhim Singh guessed that a strong force would be watching the Debari Pass. He must, therefore, strike in between them and the lake and hope not to be detected too soon. He must wait until the Emperor's strong reserves were being brought into action elsewhere on the field. Posted on a tree-top for hours he watched the battle, restraining his natural impetuosity with great difficulty. It was not until the late afternoon that his chance came.

Some hours after midday the three Rajput chieftains were desoried by the enemy galloping down upon them on the left flank. Furious were the charges and counter-charges. The swivel-guns on the camels were brought into play, the riders discharging and reloading the 'little wasps' without dismounting. They succeeded in their object of distracting the gunners of the artillery in position on the ridge. The Rana seized the opportunity and effected a crossing, though not without considerable loss. Meanwhile Aurangzeb's camel corps had driven off the Rana's camels.

The Rana's charge up to the guns was repelled, though Durgadas and his Rahtors fought very fiercely. The iron chains were an unforeseen obstacle. His men were driven back to the bed of the river. Fortunately his gunners in the excitement of the battle forgot their former kindness to their fellow-mercenaries on the opposite side of the river. Perhaps, too, they feared the vengeance of Aurangzeb should they fall into his hands.

alive They began to shoot with accuracy over the heads of the Rajputs in the river bed and on the lower part of the slope in front of them They did much damage to the enemy guns and afforded a breathing space to their horsemen

The three Rajput chiefs were hotly engaged They had overrun some of the gun teams on the flank In the thick of the fight some of their men had dismounted and sacrificed their lives in unloosing the iron chains between the guns, so opening a number of gaps for their cavalry The musketeers had advanced to the support of the guns Though they could fire but once to every five discharges of arrows from the Rajput horse, they proved too numerous and had a better supply of ammunition The Rajputs were driven back towards the flank Many of their horses were now riderless The enemy cavalry on the left wing repeatedly charged It seemed as though the clansmen must be driven into the river

But the Rana and Durgadas came to their rescue by frequent charges on their side They were beginning to make headway, though losing heavily from some of the guns that found a clear field of fire Relief from this came only when the Muslim cavalry from the right flank fell upon them When friend and foe were thus inextricably mixed the guns perforce were obliged to cease fire

The day was going very badly for the Rana Alamgir had brought up his reserves and was about to deliver the final blow when volleys of well-aimed arrows scattered his cavalry on the right flank Bhim Singh on foot was leading his hordes of bowmen most valantly Their shooting whilst it lasted was deadly But they in their turn were driven back by a charge of cavalry from the

reserves Bhim Singh had carefully planned his tactics. He had so posted the matchlock men and the archers that when the advance party were driven off, they could not be driven far. Enemy cavalry were constantly receiving volleys from little-expected quarters. Though the Prince could not strike any decided blow to ensure victory, yet he brought relief and compelled the enemy to detach a large body to hold him off at a safe distance.

The Rana and his brave chieftains were thus enabled to rally to the attack again. Alamgir now threw himself and the thousands of unwearied horsemen hitherto held in reserve into the heart of the battle. They could hear his voice urging on his men. Constantly he was shouting 'Khuda hai'. He was in his element. Not for the first time in his life had he sat on the elephant pad unperturbed though it was studded so thick with arrows that it looked like a porcupine with bristling quills. Slowly the Rajputs were driven back and back. They had shot off all their arrows and were contesting every inch with sabre and lance. It was marvellous how they still held together in compact masses. Had they been less desperate they would have been completely routed ere now.

The Emperor was elated. Victory was in his grasp. His elephant was just then pushing its way through some scrub; a small nullah barred its path. It was necessary to make a slight *détour*. Suddenly, inexplicably, it lifted its trunk and trumpeted madly with pain and terror. It turned, with blood gushing from its two fore-legs. The mahout savagely dug his iron prong into its head again and again. The body-guard drove at it with their lances and were dashed aside like waves before the prow of a ship. The elephant would not be turned to face again the enemy that he dreaded more than all else.

in the world—a wild boar and its tusks. Out of that small nullah a boar had dashed. The world above him seemed to have gone topsy-turvy. He had lain there all day but his patience was exhausted. He was very angry and determined at last to make some one rue the disturbing of his peace.

The cavalry on the extreme flanks gave way first. They had not seen exactly what happened. They imagined that the Emperor was in flight, or sorely wounded and being carried to the rear. The musketeers deemed it prudent to get a good start from pursuing Rajputs. They threw down their cumbrous weapons and fled. The body-guard held together, and their bashis and mansabdars, dashing hither and thither, did their best to prevent the panic. Their efforts were in vain. In fifteen minutes the compact and conquering army became a howling mob, a disorganized horde falling over one another in their headlong rout.

Of a verity the stars in their courses had fought for Mewar!

CHAPTER XIV

TIT FOR TAT

THE amazement of the Rana, and of all those of his valiant feudatories and allies who had thus far escaped death, at this unexpected turn of events was beyond belief. They hardly dared trust their own eyes. Their stupefaction, however, did not endure many minutes. Shouting the different war-cries of their clans, they spurred their jaded steeds to the pursuit. Foremost among them was Mokham and his Saktawats. Into the still compact body-guard and reserves they dashed with such irresistible vigour that they cut their way through to the imperial standards and captured them. No prouder trophies could hang on any castle wall or be displayed in any ruler's armoury.

The Rana, sorely wounded, had retired from the struggle now that victory was theirs. But Durgadas, by some miracle still unscathed, led his Rahtor clansmen with incredible spirit after the fleeing Mughals and, surrounding Alamgir's reserve of elephants, turned them and brought them back in triumph. Alamgir had managed to save most of his horse-artillery during the action and had sent them to the rear, but he lost his heavy ordnance. The captured elephants dragged twenty undamaged pieces in triumph to Udaipur.

Fortunate it was for Alamgir that fatigue of horse and

man forbade a long pursuit. The clans were obliged to desist and to content themselves with becoming masters of his standing camp, from which his Queen had been extricated only just in time to escape capture. His losses that day in men and in equipment were immense.

The broken armies fled eastwards to the shelter of Chitor, and on their way were joined by the astonished Akbar. One comfort that unfortunate Prince now had, his father could hardly blame him for his reverses in the valley and at the Sadri Pass. Of the Emperor himself history would record that he had 'recalled himself from that region' or had '*beaten a strategic retreat*, the better to spring upon an over-confident foe'.

Many widows mounted the funeral pyre. Eager to join their husbands in 'the mansions of the sun,' they proudly laid themselves down on the bed of death by the side of their valiant lords who had so gallantly reaped the harvest of battle and on the field of honour had spread a carpet of the slain.

When all the necessary rites had been attended to and the wounded had been carried back to Udaipur, the Rana proclaimed that as soon as his own wounds permitted he would once more go in solemn state and procession to render thanks to Eklinga. The captured guns would add greater lustre to this thanksgiving by booming out salutes from the palace ridge.

In spite of this great victory, their position was not yet satisfactory. They were short of supplies. The land had been laid waste. What they could not carry to the hills had been destroyed. If the Emperor could be driven from Chitor, the Rana could detach strong flying columns to swoop down upon the enemy's rich provinces.

of Gujarat and Malwa and thereby re-provision his own armies in the field

The Emperor was persevering and tenacious of purpose. He would naturally be anxious to retrieve his accidental defeat. To move him from his present strong positions it was necessary, according to the wise counsel of Rutten Singh, Rawat of Salumbar, to threaten his communications with his base at Ajmer. He must be hindered of all reinforcements from that direction at least. Accordingly it was decided to despatch the gallant Sawaldas, the descendant of the illustrious Jaisal, to the northern part of the state to threaten the Emperor's lines of communication, whilst Bhum Singh in command of a strong reconnoitring force harassed his foraging parties at Chitor and kept him perpetually on the alert.

Their plans succeeded beyond expectation. The Emperor became alarmed for his personal safety. He would not await the arrival of his son Sultan Muazzam, whom he had summoned from the Deccan to help him retrieve his prestige in the north. Leaving Akbar and Azam at Chitor, with instructions how to act until reinforced, he left this perilous warfare and at the head of his guards set out to Ajmer.

Jagat Singh, the commander of the Ranawat body-guard of Bhum Singh, who had been with the Prince in Delhi, detected this movement when out on reconnaissance duty and immediately reported it to the young man.

For some time past Ambalika's champion had been wondering how he could avenge the insult shown to his beloved by Tahawwar Khan's attempted capture of the royal ladies. If only he could pay back the Mughal in

the same coin, how splendid that would be! He received the news of the Emperor's departure with joy, and told his ambition to his companion-in-arms

'Let us follow them up When they think themselves out of danger, they will get careless, and perhaps we shall find an opportunity of raiding their camp and carrying off a useful hostage or two'

'I am with you, Prince, though I think you overbold Still it will be a glorious adventure We cannot take many men with us, we must not forget the Rana's instructions completely'

'Sixty daring spirits should suffice, and a few spare horses We must also get hold of a couple of camel litters for the ladies if we capture them 'Tis a big "if." Yet "tit for tat" is a good cure'

'Leave that to me, Prince We have no camels with us We must therefore depend on our luck in the Emperor's camp If not, I am afraid there's no help for it, the poor ladies will have a rough time of it until we are beyond pursuit Yet I dislike the idea of dragging these soft and delicate creatures along Whilst we are about it, Prince, why not the Emperor himself? It will surely be easier to get at him than to penetrate into his seraglio'

'Well spoken, Jagat Singh, you are right, why copy bad examples and make war on women? Let us fly at the highest game and finish this war at a blow We were his prisoners once, let us repay the compliment We shall be as polite and considerate as circumstances permit 'Twill be an undying theme for our bards'

Sixty daring men were chosen They were told what was afoot They were prepared for anything provided there was a spice of romance or of danger in it Many

of them had been in Delhi with their Prince and all of them were devoted to the manly youth

Leaving Kishan Singh in charge of the troops that had been detained to watch and worry the Mughals at Chitor, the Prince set out in prudent pursuit of the Emperor's camp. His little band were nearly caught by the cavalry sent out by Sultan Azam to act as a screen across the country to protect the rear of the departing Emperor. That would have been a sad ending to what promised, successful or not, to be a daring enterprise. It was therefore necessary to travel by night and make the most of a waning moon until they had passed into safer country and the cavalry had been recalled.

The imperial camp, guarded by five thousand picked household troops, moved rapidly for the first half of their long journey of a hundred and ten miles. Not until they had passed through the deserted village of Bhilwara on the Kotari river did the Mughals proceed more leisurely as in peace-time excursions. Advancing to meet them were five thousand men whom the commandant at Ajmer had sent forward to escort the Emperor on the last stages of his journey.

Had it not been for this reinforcement the gallant Sawaldas, who was posted in the hills to the west not many miles away from Mandal, would have swooped down upon the Emperor and attempted to repeat the exploit of Mahabat Khan. That general, the partisan of Shah Jahan, had once seized the Emperor Jahangir as he lay in camp beside a river on his way to Kabul and was separated from the main body of his escort, who had crossed over in advance. Mahabat Khan wished to give him a lesson not to allow Nur Mahal to have so

much power. Now Aurangzeb's route lay across several rivers, and similar opportunities might have occurred. Reluctantly had Sawaldas relinquished the idea and contented himself with pillaging some of the supply trains and capturing quite a number of the camp-followers who kept up the camp bazaars.

The Emperor had two camps, one always going on a stage ahead, so that he might not have to wait for the pitching of his elaborate camp every evening, but could walk straight into his luxurious tent with his Queen and her women. Half the camp-followers and the bazaar-men went ahead with the *Paish-khana* or advance camp, which was protected by two thousand of the body-guard. The camping grounds were always carefully selected for effective defence, for Sawaldas's activities had alarmed the Emperor. He was right glad to welcome the troops from Ajmer.

Night after night Bhim Singh and his escort leader lay in some concealed post of observation and considered ways and means of entering the strongly guarded encampment. They were beginning to think that they were on a fool's errand and had better give it up, when Jagat Singh thought of Sawaldas. He suggested to the Prince that after all they might join him, and together make a daring raid upon the camp. Capturing the Emperor seemed a hopeless game, but a night attack would frighten Alamgir if it accomplished nothing else, and they would have something to show for their weary chase.

The Prince still hankered after their original idea, but he was quite willing to wait still longer, and in the meanwhile consult Sawaldas. A messenger was sent across to the hills to find him.

The following evening found the three men in close consultation in a spot overlooking the next camping ground. They had watched the Grand Quartermaster marking out the spacious square within which the royal tents were to be pitched after the ground had been cleared and levelled by the pioneers. Every ten paces two poles had been fixed side by side, between these were put the lofty screens, composed of strong red cloth lined with printed calico stretched on light wooden frames. In an incredibly short space of time the screens were made firm by ropes attached to pegs and the whole square was enclosed. The laden elephants and camels passed within to deposit their loads. Within and facing the entrance of this screened enclosure a lofty tent arose, upheld by two huge poles and covered with red cloth. These poles were in three pieces and formed the load of one elephant, who had been trained to lift them about in his trunk as directed by the pioneers. This was the audience tent. Usually there was at least three such tents, but the Emperor had lost the others after his recent defeat.

Behind this big tent two smaller enclosures with more elaborate screens of flowered chintz or figured satin and decorated with silken fringes were made within the royal square. In one the private tents of the monarch were pitched; in the other behind his the tents of his Begum and her women. These tents were very numerous, but the experienced pioneers had them up in a short time, and, placing within them thick cotton mats, covered these with splendid carpets and square brocade cushions for royal feet to tread on and royal backs to lean against.

In front of the square a large open space was left. In this, some little distance from the royal gate, were set up two large tents, the *Nakkar Khana* for the musicians

with their trumpets and cymbals, and the Chauki Khana or guard tent

To the right and left of this midmost square men were busy marking out similar but smaller enclosures for the amirs at stated intervals on either side of a broad track running across the open space in front of the square. In between them the mansabdars and inferior amirs had their tents, leaving room, however, for a line of special tents by the side of the royal enclosure for the Emperor's horses, elephants and camels, and for the eunuchs and other officers of the household. The common troopers had their tents behind the quarters of their respective commanders, to bear the brunt of any attack upon the camp.

Along the broad track running through the camp from side to side lofty bamboo poles were erected bearing red standards and white chowries. At intervals at right angles across the central track ran smaller roads also marked by lofty poles similarly decorated. On either side of these roads were pitched the tents and booths of the camp purveyors or bazaarmen.

Into the symmetrically laid-out encampment the three watchers saw late in the evening the royal procession advance. The few horse-guns that had been saved were already drawn up on both sides of the royal gate ready to fire a salute as the Emperor entered. Preceded by a number of men on foot, armed with long bamboos to clear the road of all intruders, came ten stately elephants in costly trappings, the massive bells of silver upon them giving out a rich musical sound as they moved in their solemn measured way. On the back of the first elephant, in a splendid gilded and painted *meghdambhar*, a sort of little chamber latticed and covered with a silken net

with beautiful tassels and fringes, rode Udeperri, the favourite and Circassian wife of Anrangzeb, who had accompanied him on this arduous campaign. On both sides of her were her women-servants riding handsome padhorses. Her chief eunuchs were close to them, splendidly mounted, each carrying his wand of office.

Behind her came, in due order, with equipage and retinue proportionate to their rank, the eight principal ladies of her court. The last of these ladies was riding in a capacious litter, covered with a canopy of scarlet cloth with curtains of chintz beneath the silken net, suspended between two smaller elephants. This was a more comfortable way of travelling, for the litter gently swung to and fro like a hammock, whereas the *megh-dambhars* swayed from side to side with the oscillating movement of the beasts beneath them. They were followed at a short interval by the Emperor himself seated in a *takht-i-rawan*, a superb litter with painted pillars and glass windows borne by eight men, four in front and four behind. The four poles of the litter were covered with brocade having deep fringes of silk and gold.

'This monarch makes war in a comfortable manner,' remarked Bhim Singh to his companions. 'I warrant the insides of his tents are nearly as gorgeous as the Diwan-i-'Am at Delhi. We must remind him that he is still at war. Advise us, Sawaldas, have you thought of a plan?'

'Well, Prince, it has just occurred to me that if you wish to get into that camp to execute your fantastic idea you can only do so in disguise. Now, I have captured some of these bazaar purveyors, Punjabis, I think they are. Why not get in amongst the bazaar folk and open a shop yourself at the next camp? You must then set your wits to work and try your luck.'

'A splendid idea,' exclaimed Jagat Singh excitedly. 'Dress us up in the Punjab style and give us their pass and their powder and we'll do it. We ought to know how to play the part for we have did about the Delhi bazaar long enough. Prince, yourself, myself, Jaswant, and I Bhag will do the business to a nicety right.'

Accordingly, the following night found them installed in the long bazaar street not far from the right side of the royal enclosure. Horse food was their stock in trade. They managed the camp dialect pretty well enough, thanks to their Delhi experience. Luckily no Purjsh, however came their way, else they might have been asked awkward questions. It was clear to them, however, that it must be now or never. They could not afford to take risks.

It was a dark night. The scattered trees under which most of the tents had been pitched spoiled the usual symmetry of the camp but aided the conspirators. One large banyan tree stood just outside the royal enclosure, its branches overhanging the screens. Had they known what was on foot the pioneers would have cut it down.

All round the camp the guard fires were burning. Round each amir's quarters the watchmen were calling out as they went, khabardar, 'have a care!' The kotwal or provost-marshal had sent his soldiers to perambulate the bazaar crying out khabardar, and every little while blowing a trumpet. In spite of all precautions robberies were frequent enough, and the robbers when caught were treated to very short shrift. It would never do to be caught wandering aimlessly about.

Blum Singh and his three companions behind the sacks of grain and bundles of hay in their booth had held a long debate as to the best hour for his daring attempt to get into the Emperor's tent. Obviously, it

must be some time after the amirs had returned to their respective quarters from their customary attendance at the tent of audience to make their obeisances to the Emperor. Yet when all had more or less settled down for the night, the guards would be very suspicious of casual wanderers.

Accordingly it was decided that, whilst the camp was still astir, the Prince should walk to the banyan tree with a sack of provender on his back, as if he were going to deliver it to one of the royal grooms in the tents on that side of the enclosure. If possible, he could empty the sack and use it to throw over the monarch after having gagged him from behind with his turban and tied his feet together. The Emperor was old and very slight in build. He would be no burden for the athletic Prince.

When the torches that guided the few amirs to their tents had all been extinguished, a figure, bent beneath a heavy sack so that his face could not be seen, might have been observed slowly making his way down that side of the royal square where the banyan tree stood.

It was a fine old tree, with its main trunk surrounded by several smaller ones having convenient hiding space between them. It was no very difficult matter for Bhm Singh after passing one of the sentries unchallenged to slip between these trunks in the dark.

Into that space he emptied the bundles of hay from his sack, sprang into the branches and waited a weary hour before, as lightly as a cat, he jumped down on the other side. He found himself just at the rear corner of the first of the two inner enclosures as he could make out from the dark outlines of the lofty audience tent against the sky.

In that space not a soul was moving. Some tents in both enclosures had lamps still burning. He had hoped all would be in darkness. Crawling rapidly through the cloth of a screen which he had cut open with his knife, he continued on hands and knees picking his way between some smaller tents towards the central one in the first enclosure. He had to be particularly careful not to jerk the tent ropes.

He lay still for a moment to take his bearings. The dim outline of the old tree was a sure mark. The central tent was a fairly large two-pole double-fly tent with an outer passage running all round it. He lay and listened. In the passage he could hear some one breathing. Cautiously he crawled all round three sides, he dared not go across the front for two men were on guard outside the entrance.

He decided to try his chance from the rear. Loosening a couple of cords that held down the fly, he pushed his head and shoulders, with the sack across them, inside. Fortunately it was one of the largest sacks they could find. Drowsy body-servants were sitting dozing in the passage. From the breathings he gathered that there were two of them at the corners. He drew his legs inside and, still covered with the sack, pulled himself along till his head touched the inner wall of the tent. Cautiously, very cautiously, he cut a small peep-hole and looked within.

There was his victim lying propped up on a gilt couch reading a book, with lamps burning on tripod stands on either side of his head. "'Tis hopeless," thought the Prince, 'I shall never be able to do it, who would have thought that the old man would be piously reading the Qur'an at this time of night? Had he been quietly

asleep. I should have had an excellent chance But now, so near and yet so far!'

The Emperor began reciting the verses in a low tone. The drowsing servants roused themselves. One rose to his feet and stretched his arms with a suppressed yawn, and began carefully to grope his way along to sit down by his companion. Bhim Singh heard the movement and started to beat a retreat, crawling backwards to the loosened fly of the tent. By some mischance his feet missed the place. The man was almost upon him, he slewed his body round so as to lie parallel to the outer tent wall. He was not quick enough. The sack half slipped off his shoulders and, as ill fate would have it, caught the walker's foot.

He stopped to pick it up, cursing under his breath the untidy ways of his companion, who was always leaving his clothes lying about. Bhun Singh had just found the opening and was wriggling through it when, unfortunately, the servant's hand touched his foot. Instantly alive to danger, he called as loudly as he dared to his fellow the one word 'robbers'. The other man bolted round to the front and warned the two guards, who proceeded rapidly to the rear, one on each side of the tent.

Meanwhile the servant whose hand had touched Blum Singh's foot dropped to his knees and tried to wriggle his way out in pursuit. The Prince, who had not relinquished the sack, threw it over his enemy's head and jerked him over the ropes. He then rose and stooping proceeded to run along in the direction of the tree. He had not gone many paces before he bumped into one of the guards with such violence that he took the wind out of him and doubled him up for a moment or two.

It was enough. He reached his tree, swung up into the branches again, listened to discover if the coast was clear, for he did not wish to drop on to the sentry, heard him go by and stop to give heed to the commotion within the enclosure, where torches were being carried about by searchers for the bold intruder, dropped ever so lightly on to the ground and made his way, dodging along in the shadows, back to his three anxious companions. Breathlessly he told them it was no use. They must slip out of camp early next morning and return to Chitor.

CHAPTER XV

THE OUTLAW

Slipping out of the Mughal camp early next morning whilst all were busy preparing for the day's march, Bhim Singh and his companions made their way back to their camp near Chitor. They had determined to say nothing about their adventures. Shortly afterwards the Rana instructed the Thakur of Ghanerao to reinforce Sawaldas from the garrisons on the Aravallis, in order that the gallant leader might intercept supplies and reinforcements sent down from Ajmer. The rainy season was about to begin, when all operations in the open field must perforce come to a stop. The Rana's foresight was justified. Word reached him that Aurangzeb was despatching twelve thousand men and ample supplies to his sons. Bhim Singh was warned to display unusual activity so as to prevent any northward movement by Akbar and Azam, who were soon to be joined by a new army under Sultan Muazzam from the Deccan. These Princes were foolishly inactive. Fearing another pitched battle, they lost thereby all chance of being reinforced, for Sawaldas now felt himself ready to abandon his guerrilla tactics and to give pitched battle to the foe. He met them in the open field at Pur Mandal and defeated them with great loss, driving them back to Ajmer.

The troops in the field were now recalled. Prince Bhim Singh returned to Udaipur and found his father still suffering from his wounds, which had not healed so rapidly as it was hoped. However, the Rana's spirit was unbroken and his brain was as active as ever. He was planning raids upon the enemy provinces of Gujarat and Malwa. As soon as the rains were over Prince Bhim Singh was to lead an expedition into Gujarat, and the Civil Minister, Dayal Sah, a man of high courage and activity, was to head another flying column into Malwa.

Meanwhile Prince Bhim had to possess his soul in patience. He learnt that Rani Korumdevi and his beloved Princess had returned to Jodhpur, which for the time being was free from the invader's unwelcome presence. He had no excuse, nor any occasion for a visit to them. Even if, as was likely enough, the Rani decided after the rains to pay a fleeting visit to her infant son at Mount Abu, Prince Bhim in command of a rapid raid upon Gujarat could hardly hope to have the good luck to come across them on their journey. There would be no time for love-making and dallying whilst the necessity of reprovisioning the Rana's armies was so urgent.

However, he had the consolation of learning that during his absence chasing the Emperor, Sultan Akbar had kept his word and, under a flag of truce, had sent the traitor Goculdas to the Rana. Goculdas had thrown himself on the Rana's mercy and told him the exact truth, without any attempt to excuse or palliate his base conduct. Tahawwar Khan, who commanded the escort that had brought him in, had corroborated his statements and had shown how Goculdas had limited himself in his treacherous designs, whereas a slight indiscretion

on his part might easily have betrayed the Rajput plans and have saved Akbar's army from being entrapped so completely as it had been.

After due consultation with his chieftains, the Rana had decided on outlawry as a fitting punishment. Accordingly, on a set day, before the assembled durbar in front of the palace, the ceremony of outlawry had been gone through. The culprit was brought forward dressed entirely in black from turban to shoes. Sentence was pronounced. A black shield and lance and a sword in a black scabbard were handed to him, a coal-black horse with black trappings was led forward, and he was told to remove himself without delay from the sight of loyal men. Twenty-four hours' grace was granted to him. After this, if found in Rajput territory, every man's hand would be against him. Saluting the clement Rana and the assembled nobles, Goculdas sprang upon the horse and was gone.

During the breaks in the rains, the Prince and his companions trained their horses and practised themselves in all kinds of martial exercises. He taught his friends his skilful way of throwing the javelin. He learnt how to use a matchlock and was present at the artillery practices carried out by the Frank gunners. Floating targets fitted with sails were set adrift on the lake so that the gunners had to adjust their pieces to the correct angles before their cannon balls could take effect. All this Bhim Singh unobtrusively studied. Great was his joy one day when, invited to try his skill at laying a gun, he aimed so correctly as to shatter the target. And so the months passed.

At last one bright crisp morning in Pushya five thousand men mustered on the 'field of war' to be reviewed

by the Rana before setting forth across the hilly tracts to the south under their eager Prince. They were all well mounted and in splendid condition for their trying campaign. The Rana, as he rode down the lines, was well pleased with them, and wished them good fortune.

Their route lay across sixty miles of wild forest country sparsely inhabited by the savage Bhils and lawless tribes of mixed descent. The Rana had no jurisdiction here, and the tribes lived by robbery and plunder or by the proceeds of *rakwal* or blackmail paid by the villages who desired to escape their lawless depredations. But now 'the lords of the passes' were in friendly alliance with the Rana. Still, it was not safe travelling for small detached parties. Stragglers were ruthlessly plundered. Consequently Bhim Singh kept his forces well together. Their numbers commanded respect. Thus they made their way to Kotra, intending thence to follow the streams that flowed southward into the river Sabarmata.

They had passed through several Bhl p^{als} or clan settlements as they rode along the thickly wooded valleys and over the rocky hills. Each settlement covered a large area and was divided into hamlets, groups of huts built of interwoven bamboos or loose stones. Each homestead, constructed on a small mound in the valleys or on the slope of a hill, contained also several huts for cattle and for grain, all within a single enclosure. Inter-tribal feuds and forays were frequent. Consequently each family had to be well prepared to stand a siege.

From each settlement as he passed through it the Prince gathered contingents of bowmen. News of his expedition had preceded him, and the wild mountaineers who lived by robbery were easily attracted by the prospects of a goodly share in the rich plunder. But his

progress was somewhat delayed by his having to wait until each contingent of warriors had danced the *ghanna* or customary war-dance before an expedition. With the drummers in the centre the men revolved in a circle around them with sticks in their hands. These sticks each man struck alternately against those in front and those behind, keeping time with the drum. As the excitement grew the dancers leaped about more wildly, and every now and then one would leave his companions and dance by himself within the circle, with his long black hair, usually plaited and fastened with a wooden comb, flowing out behind him.

In the last of the pails that they had passed through before they left the hilly tracts the Rajputs were delayed for several days. The headman who was to have led the contingent of this clan had met a violent death. The Bhils would not set out before they had celebrated the funeral feast. Now it so happened that the morning of Bhim Singh's arrival was the twelfth day after the headman had met his death. All the dead man's friends from far and near had assembled to do him honour. That day was to be spent in performing the ceremony of the *arad*, on the next day the feast would be held.

The delay could not be helped, and the Prince and his men were obliged to wait. They grouped themselves on the hill slopes and watched with much interest the ceremonies of the *arad* that were conducted in the open glade beneath them.

On a wooden platform was seated the Bhopa or witch-finder of the village. Near him was a big earthen pot with a brass dish over its mouth. The Bhil drummers were beating upon this dish, at the same time singing funeral dirges. The Bhopa was seen to be getting

excited The spirit of the dead man had entered into him He called for a bow and arrows, for the headman had been slain by an arrow shot by some unknown foe The witch-finder seized the bow and the quiver made of strong bamboo matting, he jumped about and shouted the war-cry, and with each shout fired an arrow into the air. The dead man's spirit evidently wished to slay his slayer After this, the spirits of the deceased's ancestors were called up by the Bhopa, who, as each spirit entered into him, went through the same performance, varying it only by calling for sword or lance, if the particular man whose spirit was possessing him had been killed by either of these weapons, or by demanding milk, ghee and sugar if the man had happened to die a natural death These ceremonies lasted until late in the afternoon

In the evening the Bhil Jogi made his appearance on the scene He was provided with many seers of wheat and maize flour, which he deposited in front of the deceased's bier On the top of the flour he put the brass image of a horse with a small hole in it into which the spirit of the dead man was supposed to enter and travel up to paradise In front of the brazen horse he stuck an arrow and a small copper coin Then before these he placed two empty jars, the mouths of which were covered by red cloth and white respectively Tying a small piece of rope round the neck of the horse to prevent its sudden flight heavenwards, he rehearsed the names of the deceased's ancestors and called upon the hear to give alms or religious grants in their memory

The hear stepped forward and, presenting the Jogi with a fine milch-cow, requested him to give food to the deceased The Jogi, pleased with the handsome gift, cooked some rice in milk and poured it into a small hole

he had dug in the ground. A potful of liquor followed it together with a small coin. After this he filled up the hole again with earth. More gifts were presented to him by the heir, who in his turn also received many presents from family friends.

The next morning, whilst the dead man's relatives were feasting the villagers, the Prince rode forward with some of the chieftains to a commanding peak to trace out their best route down the ghat through the thick jungle that covered the steep slopes. Having chosen the mountain stream that promised to be their surest guide, they were returning to their bivouac near the Bhil pāl, where the feasting was now at its height and the crude liquor supplied by the heir was making the revellers very drunk. 'Another delay,' gloomily reflected the Prince, as he heard the drunken songs in the distance, 'but I cannot wait overlong for these men to recover their wits.'

Even as these thoughts were passing through his mind his good horse Thunderbolt shied at a black object lying under a fig tree in an open clearing at the bottom of a glen. Pattang Thunderbolt's glossy neck, Bhim Singh brought him towards the object and discovered it to be a man lying asleep full length upon the sward. In a moment he recognised from his black garments and weapons that this was none other than the outlaw Goculdas. Near by, under a clump of trees on the hill slope, a black horse was quietly cropping the grass.

Dismounting, the Prince roughly shook the sleeper, who shortly sat up, rubbing his eyes.

'What means this unmannerly disturbance?' he growled in a thick voice. 'Canst not leave an unhappy wretch alone?'

'Rise, Goculdas, I, Bhim Singh, bracelet-bound

brother to the Princess Ambalika, have a score to settle with thee !'

At the sound of this voice Goculdas slowly rose to his feet and stood swaying unsteadily. He tried to pull himself together and to realise who it was that was speaking to him.

'Bhim Singh, Bhim Singh ? What brings him to these wild parts ?' he muttered in drowsy bewilderment. 'Can he, like me, be going to cast in his fortunes with the bold Mahratta ?'

And then a light dawned upon his opium-addled brain. He answered slowly 'Well, Prince Bhim, so you have tracked me down, though I know not how, but now of your courtesy leave me for two hours more to sleep off this opiate and then shall I be ready to settle the score. Perchance I shall not find you so easy a prey as that thick-headed Bhul robber whom I shot some twelve days back, but I am not so in love with my life that I should hesitate to risk it in a stern fight. A duel to the death in true Rajput style is more to my taste than shooting down sneakish horse-thieves.'

'So 'tis thou we must thank for yon funeral feast and the annoying delay in our urgent business,' remarked the Prince. 'Well, well, sleep off the fumes of thy potion, miserable catiff, and then be prepared to meet thy doom.'

'Speak not too rashly, fair sir,' replied the other, whose senses were rapidly awakening, 'you will find me a formidable adversary. A man may be an outlaw, but it follows not that he is a coward or a catiff. He gets plenty of practice in self-defence, I trow.'

When he had thus spoken, Goculdas laid himself down again to sleep, whilst the Prince and his companions

drew off to the hillside, dismounted and stretched themselves upon the grass

At the appointed time Goculdas arose, shook himself, stretched his arms and drew a few deep breaths. He whistled to his steed, who neighed in reply and came trotting to his master to be saddled and bridled. Then the outlaw with calm deliberateness buckled on his coat of mail and his sword. With his lance in his right hand and his black shield upon his left arm he sprang lightly into the saddle and halloed across the glen to announce that he was ready.

In truth he was, as he had said, a formidable adversary. Tall and powerfully built, he had a long reach with his muscular arm. Considerably older than the Prince, he had the advantage of experience in many a hard-won fight. None could be more at home in the saddle than he. Between him and the steed he loved more tenderly than a wife there was a perfect understanding. The fight was indeed to prove the sternest of all the fights in Bhim Singh's adventurous career.

The Prince cantered slowly up to him in order to settle the terms of the combat. They agreed that it was to be a fight to the bitter end. If a lance were broken, the lances of the Prince's companions were to be used. If all the lances were splintered without either being thrown, then they should both dismount and continue the fight on foot. Again, if either were dismounted by a lance-thrust or any mischance, the duel was to be fought out on foot with sword and dagger until one or other should be killed. The idea of flight never occurred to either of them.

The ground was favourable for such a contest. The glen with its open grassy bottom gave them a run of

some eighty yards. The only obstacle was the large fig-tree that stood rather near the fairway towards the centre. However, the boughs were high enough to permit of a horseman passing under them without impediment. But they might obstruct the upward swing of a sword. Therefore it was agreed that the sword should be used only on foot.

When these preliminaries had been duly settled, each rode to his end of the glen. Turning their horses, they galloped towards each other and met with a tremendous shock. Each man's lance was splintered to pieces on the other's shield. New lances were procured and once more they ran at each other.

This time the Prince had the worst of the encounter. Goculdas caught the Prince's lance-point square on his shield, which, though much dinted by the blow, held off the deadly steel head. The Prince had not brought up his shield in time, Goculdas' spear glanced off it and tore an ugly gap in Bhim Singh's coat of mail under his right arm. The blood began to flow. The Prince knew that he must end the fight soon or his wound might prove his undoing.

Setting his jaw hard, he prepared for the third career. This time he reached the tree a trifle sooner than his adversary, but most unfortunately he took Thunderbolt too near it. Just as they were about to encounter, Thunderbolt stumbled against a projecting root of the tree. Realising that his arm was lost, the Prince dropped his lance, slipped his feet out of the stirrups, pressed his knees hard upon the upper sides of his saddle, and simultaneously reached up his left arm. Grasping a bough with all his might, he swung clear of Thunderbolt, who galloped on riderless.

All this had been done with the speed of thought. Goculdas thrust hard at the Prince, but this unusual manoeuvre on Bhim Singh's part saved his life, for the outlaw's spear passed harmlessly between his legs as he swung for a moment on the bough.

Dropping to the ground, Bhim Singh drew his sword and turned to face his enemy, who, disdaining to play false, had jumped off his horse. Drawing his sword as he ran, he engaged the Prince in a furious onslaught. It was all Bhim Singh could do to parry his blows. The wound in his side was sapping his strength. Back and back he leaped to escape the savage swinging sword of his adversary. One mighty blow split his shield, already much damaged, his left arm felt the sharp cut of the cleaving sword. Too shaken to use his sword, he sprang back and, throwing the now useless shield from him, with his unencumbered left hand he drew his dagger.

It was now or never. He ran in boldly right under the downward rush of his enemy's sword, dropping, as he did so, on one knee and jerking his head to one side. He trusted that he would thus catch the force of the blow near the hilt and so mitigate its severity. His shoulders were guarded by a double thickness of steel chain-mail and his back also was well enough protected, but he must trust to his good stars to get his head out of the way in time.

Goculdas, endeavouring to shorten his swing, stumbled against the kneeling figure, upon whose back he brought down his sword with diminished force. The next instant he rolled backwards onto the grass. The Prince had by a sharp turn of his left wrist jerked his narrow-bladed sharp-pointed dagger through Goculdas's mail into his heart.

It was all done so suddenly that the chieftains, who had had the greatest difficulty in restraining themselves from coming to the aid of the wounded and rapidly-tiring Prince, hardly realised that all was over and that the wheel of fortune had revolved in Bhim Singh's favour.

Over the dead man they raised a cairn of stones. His horse they turned adrift. It was unlucky to despoil an outlaw. For that reason, too, they buried his armour with him. Bhim Singh's wounds were bathed in a neighbouring stream and bound up. He was faint with loss of blood, but a rest of several days and nourishing food restored him sufficiently to enable him to carry out his expedition into Gujarat with resolution, rapidity and vigour.

CHAPTER XVI

A BID FOR A THRONE

It was towards the end of the month of Magha in the following year that the Rana launched his last offensive against the Mughals still on the soil of Mewar. Dayal Sah, the Civil Minister, had returned from his expedition into Malwa full of spoils. The provisions, the money and the cattle that he had brought back with him were an exceedingly welcome addition to the Rana's waning supplies. Aurangzeb, who was chiefly vulnerable through his resources, had set them a bad example in ruthless pillaging. Circumstances forced the Rajputs to abandon, in this one instance, their traditional clemency to the vanquished. Dayal Sah had been relentless in his plundering. Numerous garrisons had been put to the sword for their stout but unavailing resistance. The minister knew that whatever he did must be done quickly. He hoped by examples of severity to the first attacked to induce the others to surrender at discretion. But the soldiers holding Malwa for the Emperor never relaxed in their loyalty. This had angered Dayal Sah. He resorted to measures against their religion, though it went contrary to the Rajput spirit. The Kazis were bound and shaved and the Qur'ans were thrown into wells.

The Rana was vexed at the news of this. Partly

perhaps on this account, and partly because he knew that his spoils were already considerable, the generous Rana had given a willing ear to the complaints of the inhabitants of Gujarat, who had sent a deputation to complain of their woes. Consequently he had recalled Bhim Singh in full career to Surat, the richest town in the whole province. The Prince had had a series of brilliant successes. He had captured Idar and proceeding by Birnagar suddenly appeared before Patan, the residence of the provincial satrap, which he plundered. Several other towns had shared the same fate. His annoyance at being recalled in the flood-tide of success may be imagined, but he dared not disobey his father, and moreover he did not wish to miss the campaign that he knew the Rana would be planning.

On the arrival of Sultan Muazzam with a strong army from the Deccan, Akbar, leaving his brother Azam at Chitor, had marched to Ajmer, whence his father intended to send him and his lieutenant Tahawwar Khan down into Marwar territory on the western side of the formidable Aravallis. Akbar had had no desire to attempt a direct passage to the sandy plains of Marwar across the mountains. One experience had been enough for him. The Rana had allowed him to leave Chitor without opposition. It would make easier his design of freeing Mewar once and for all. After that he would carry the campaign into Marwar. The gallant Durgadas and the stout-hearted Rani might be trusted to hold the Muslims in check, if need arose, until he could join them for the final phase of the campaign.

The Sesodias, encouraged by recent events, marched from victory to victory. About the time that Bhim Singh returned to Udaipur his brother Jai Singh and Dayal

Sah had fallen upon Azam near Ohtor. That Prince had allowed his brother Muazzam to occupy the formidable hill and fortress of the ancient Sesodia capital whilst he himself, in full confidence of victory, moved down to meet the advancing Rajputs. The battle was long and furious, but nothing could resist the dauntless valour of the clans. The Mughals were swept from the field in spite of the assistance brought by Muazzam. This had come too late. Azam's army was in full flight and communicated its panic to the army from the Deccan. Muazzam and his brother made valiant efforts to rally their men. They exposed themselves most fearlessly to danger in so doing, but all to no avail. They could not stem the tide of fugitives and had perforce to turn and flee with the rest. Nor did they halt until they had reached the tremendously strong fortress of Ranthambor far away to the north-east near the confluence of the Banas and the Chambal.

There the Rana was content to leave them, contained by a strong force under his heir, Jai Singh, who was to prevent them again entering Mewar. The Mughals had lost heavily, it would take them some time to re-form their armies. So now the Rana felt himself free to open his projected campaign in Godwar.

In a few weeks the red banner of Mewar was floating over the town of Ghaneisao, which the Rana made his headquarters. A proud man had the Thakur been that day when he marched out to escort his suzerain to his fortress. From the battlements near the gate Premabai had watched the incoming of the flower of Mewar chivalry. Her heart beat wildly as she noted Prince Bhim in the cavalcade. The stern experience of war had given him a more thoughtful look. He had grown

into full manhood His tall lithe figure had filled out The brightness of his eye, the grace of his movements, had never been dimmed by the use of opium or other drug The Prince had set his face against this obnoxious practice, and had by his example weaned many of his closest comrades-in-arms from the evil habit

On the evening of his arrival Premabai and her father listened with rapt attention to the Prince's modest recital of his adventures since they had parted They were intensely interested to hear how near the Prince had been to kidnapping the mighty Alamgir, the world-conqueror himself Bhim Singh bound them to secrecy, he did not know whether his father would relish the news of such a backstairs plot The Prince himself confessed that he had attempted it out of a youthful love of escapade, he half felt that it savoured more of a Pathan horse-thief's action than of a soldier's, but how, he asked them, could a youth resist such a temptation Doubtless, whether his father liked it or not, success in that exploit would have ended the war At any rate it would have given his friend Akbar a chance to step into his father's shoes, and then Rajasthan would have been assured of peace and goodwill However, he had failed, and so had hitherto kept silent about that adventure He then told them of his meeting with Goculdas They were glad to hear of the traitor's death, and yet they were sorry that Goculdas, an excellent fellow in many respects, had been led astray by the madness of love to tread such an evil path.

'The god of love wields a tyrannic power,' remarked the Thakur, 'to make even a Rajput forget his allegiance. Ah, my daughter, may it never happen that thou inspirest such fierce unruly passion in any man's heart

No doubt 'twould flatter thee, but see what misery is like to come of it'

Poor Premabai secretly longed that the Prince had given her his devotion, but not to the length of casting all other bonds of duty and allegiance to the winds. It was not to be, and so her only answer to her father was a sigh.

The Prince's mind during this conversation was filled with thoughts of Ambalika. He would ask Premabai about her at the first opportunity, never suspecting what a trial such questions would be to the Thakur's daughter.

Her father at this juncture being called apart to the outer balcony to inspect the fortress guard for that night drawn up below, Bhum Singh turned and said 'Fair Premabai, what news have you to give me of Rani Korumdevi and her ward?'

'Do you really want to know about the Rani, Prince, or only of the beautiful Princess of Amber?' replied Premabai with a brave smile. 'Will it interest you to learn how the Ram has brought over to her side some of her vassals who were inclined to waver in their allegiance owing to Mughal falsehoods about the death of the heir? Do you wish for details of the Rani's recent flying visit with these waverers to see the little Ajit at Mount Abu? Nay, nay, your heart longs not for such tidings.'

'You have guessed aright, fair maiden,' answered Bhum Singh, 'such tidings I shall learn in the council hall. But tell me—the Princess, is she even now at Jodhpur with the Ram? How does she fare?'

'She is well and happy. The last time I saw her before she left Kumbhalmer she was proudly wearing the *latchi* you sent her, that beautiful bodice of gold brocade fringed with pearls—a princely gift and acknowledgment that you would fulfil all the obligations of a

bracelet-bound brother But what need had she of such a token of your undying fidelity ? Your rescue of her was a better answer than any customary gift of a bodice in return for her bracelet She wears it so constantly that it will soon be worn out You must send her another, Prince And she must renew your bracelet 'Tis a wonder to me how you have escaped losing it in your fightings'

'Indeed I came near to losing it more than once until I hit upon the precaution of binding a silken cloth tightly over it on my wrist I see I must creep once more into the Emperor's camp, this time to steal not an Emperor but pretty baubles from his seraglio—though, upon my honour, that is the harder task'

The Prince laughed gaily as he said this, but Premabai's face wore a sad expression There was no hope for her She must finally renounce the daydreams that would visit her in spite of all her resolutions, and do her best to further the happiness of the man she loved so dearly Generous-hearted girl ! It will not be long before you are called upon to fulfil this self-sacrificing resolve !

The next day news came to the Rana that Akbar and Tahawwar Khan were marching to expel him from the territories on the western side of the Aravallis He sent an urgent message to the Rani of Jodhpur to repair once more to the safety of Kumbhalmer before her retreat was cut off He pointed out to her that though they hoped for victory it was by no means certain, because the Muslims would find the flatter country of Marwar easier to move over with their heavy guns Unlike the broken hilly country of Mewar, it was a country indeed more like the great plains to which their armies were accustomed

Meanwhile the Rana sent Bhim Singh due north with the gallant Sesodia clans to effect a junction with the Rahtors. Their object was, if possible, to drive Akbar into the mountains of which the Sultan had now a wholesome dread. As it was, the Rahtors closing in threateningly from the west had forced him to keep nearer to the mountains than he liked. His father had enjoined upon him to march down direct upon the Rana in Godwar, though the Sultan had argued that it were better to threaten the recapture of Jodhpur and thus draw his enemy away from his friendly Aravallis into the open sandy flats of Marwar. Aurangzeb was impatient to finish all at a stroke. He could not believe that the re-equipped army of his son could be defeated. He knew from his spies' reports that it was stronger in numbers than the combined Rajput forces, and he also learnt that the Rana had found it impossible to drag more than six of the captured heavy guns across the mountains, the others had one after another come to grief and been abandoned. Such were his reasons for confidence in the final issue.

Bhim Singh joined the Rahtors under Durgadas and his brother chieftains on the banks of the little Sukri river. They hailed him cordially as the bulwark of Marwar, and together they turned northwards to meet the oncoming invaders. The armies met at Nadol on the Bandi. Akbar's forces were indeed in great strength and full of confidence. Their position was a strong one. Then for two days each side was busy reconnoitring the positions of the other. Durgadas was as wise as he was brave. He would not risk annihilation until his work was done and Prince Ajit was firmly seated on his father's *gaddi*. Several chieftains made fiery speeches urging

instant attack Durgadas counselled patience and resort to stratagem. Somehow or other, though as yet he could not see a feasible method of doing it, they must first throw their enemy into confusion.

Into the informal council of war that was meeting in Durgadas' tent strode Indarbhan, one of the staunchest Rahtor chiefs, with news that one of his raiding parties had gained a rich booty—five hundred camels laden with provisions. 'Here,' said Soning, Durgadas' brother, 'here is our chance. Let us drive this herd of camels with flaming torches tied around them into our enemy's camp at dusk and fall upon them then.' This plan was warmly acclaimed.

Just after sunset, then, that same evening the unfortunate camels, grunting and squealing with terror at the horror on their backs, were driven helter-skelter upon the Mughal encampment. The outlying posts were abandoned in panic at this swaying, surging mass of flame that came upon them like a bolt from the blue as they were preparing their evening meal. In a moment the whole camp was in an uproar, men darting hither and thither trying to catch the maddened animals or else shooting them down, tents being set alight and upturned in all directions, orders and counter-orders being shouted by the mansabdars. Whilst the confusion was at its height, the terrible Rajput war-cry, 'Hur, Hur, Mahadev,' burst upon their ears. The Rajput horsemen were upon them, hacking and hewing at all they met. At first the slaughter was tremendous, until Tahawwar Khan dashed in from the further camp and partly stemmed the tide. The attackers found that fighting amidst rows of tents was not easy. Besides, the fallen tents, some burning with a horrid choking smoke, im-

peded more than they had expected. Their ropes and pegs lying scattered everywhere entangled the horses' legs. It was only their determination that won the day. The Mughals were driven back in growing confusion until darkness supervened.

It was clear to Sultan Akbar that he could never hope to conquer these determined adversaries. He was utterly tired of this bloodthirsty war. To him it appeared so ungenerous and so futile. He opened his mind to Tahawwar Khan, his companion in misfortune throughout this Rajput war, and commissioned him to go the next morning and ask for a short truce. His commander, he was to say, wished to open negotiations.

Now the Rana had known for some time past that Akbar, half a Rajput by birth, had not his heart in this cruel war. Therefore he had instructed Bhim Singh, if he could find the smallest opportunity, to try to win him over completely by offering to help him, if he wished it, to oust his father from his throne, even as his father himself had pushed Shah Jahan aside and usurped his sceptre.

Bhim Singh knew that his chance of carrying out his father's wishes had now come. At his urgent entreaty, Durgadas agreed to a three days' truce, and the Prince accompanied Tahawwar Khan to Akbar's disordered camp. News of the granting of the truce had gone before them. They entered the camp to find everyone busy setting things ship-shape again.

Sultan Akbar greeted his old friend warmly. Taking his hand he led him into his luxurious private tent and placed him on a soft divan. Seating himself close by, the Sultan thus began: 'My feelings, Prince, about this foolish bloodshed are well known to you. Can we not

try for an honourable peace ? My father must surely now see how he is but wasting men and treasure in trying to vanquish an unconquerable foe. Men who can fight like your clansmen should not be thus senselessly alienated from the Emperor's throne and service. Rajput valour and devotion should once more be the bulwark of our Empire '

'Sultan,' broke in the Prince eagerly, 'my father has commissioned me to broach a very delicate topic to you. If you like it not, speak forthwith and I shall say no more to offend you. That you are sick to death of this senseless war we know full well. But you do not realise that your father is unrelenting in his bigotry, still powerful in his resources and more determined than ever to avenge his past reverses. He sincerely believes it a sacred duty to his religion to crush us. So long, then, as he remains in power, we have no choice but to fight to the last man. But, Sultan, why should a bigot be allowed to run the mighty empire his ancestors bequeathed to him ? Let him but follow the great Akbar's benign policy and the sun will never set upon his fortunes. Have you ever reflected how he came to power ? What one man can do, so can another. What say you to throwing in your lot with us and by our trusty aid winning the throne for yourself ? Another and perchance a greater Akbar shall rule once more in Delhi, and all men shall rise up and call him blessed. What better chance than now ? The Emperor is but poorly guarded at Ajmer. Your brothers are many marches distant from him—away in distant Ranthambor. A few days, with our most assured help, will make you master of your father's person. The biter will be bit, and Shah Jahan will be avenged at last '

These words Bhum Singh poured out in a rapid flood as soon as he saw that Akbar made not the slightest demur.

'Tis a glorious project and, as you say, one certain of accomplishment if we seize this opportunity,' replied Akbar 'I accept your noble father's generous offer Summon your fellow chieftains to a conference here'

'That will I most gladly do Soon I shall hope to visit Delhi once again, as an honoured guest and not as a state-prisoner Till the morrow, Sultan, farewell, and may your dreams be pleasant'

With these words Bhum Singh arose and took his leave, escorted to the confines of the camp by the Sultan, whose face was radiant with hope

CHAPTER XVII

SAVED BY SUBTLETY

To his surprise Bhim Singh found much opposition among the chiefs to their accepting Akbar's invitation to a conference. The council which had been summoned in Durgadas' tent that evening to hear what message the Prince had brought back expressed grave doubts about the Sultan's honesty of purpose. They saw in his invitation naught but a polite request to step into the tiger's lair. The Prince was moved to a hot reply, so assured was he of Akbar's good faith. 'May all the demons of earth and sky torment me, may I crawl as a caterpillar on the floors of hell for sixty thousand years if the Sultan be not honest!' he exclaimed vehemently. 'If he be treacherous, I will atone for it with my blood. Unresisting I will offer my heart to any man's dagger.'

These brave words spoken so honestly visibly affected his hearers. They were ready to listen to the sagacious Durgadas. 'What,' said he, 'and shall we expose ourselves to the reproach of cowardice? Shall it be said of us Rajputs that we are afraid and dare not trust to the word of a prince of the blood, and he, moreover, more a Rajput than a Musulman? Prince Bhim is a shrewd observer of men though he be but young in years. Upon his head be any blood that is treacherously spilt. He

has freely offered himself as surety for the Sultan's honesty Let us go to this conference without fear'

This speech carried the day. It was agreed that Bhim Singh, Durgadas, Indarbhan and Soning should go to Akbar's camp next morning, but, lest after all treachery were attempted, the whole Rajput force should take up a commanding position near the hostile camp The Prince deemed this precaution quite unnecessary, and likely perhaps to lead to blows if any mischief-maker started a false rumour, but he was overruled and obliged to acquiesce

The next day the four chieftains, in full armour and accompanied by four grooms, proceeded on horseback into the Mughal camp through lines of unarmed men of Akbar's personal body-guard, who wondered what was afoot, but were ready, most of them, to follow their good-hearted if unfortunate commander wheresoever he might choose to lead them and whatsoever he might choose to do They found the Sultan, with Tahawwar Khan and three other amirs, awaiting them on foot outside his capacious tent To show their good faith the amirs were unarmed

They gave their visitors a soldierly salute, and together they went into the tent The horses were given over to the grooms To show that they trusted the Muslims, the Rajputs doffed their armour and laid down their weapons in a heap just within the tent door.

Cushions and divans had been arranged in a circle on the luxurious carpet in the interior of the lofty tent Upon these they sat themselves down and awaited the good pleasure of their host

After a short pause, during which he scrutinised the faces of the three Rahtor chieftains and decided that

they were trustworthy, Akbar thus began 'Prince Bhim and Thakurs of Marwar, it gladdens my heart to meet you as friends and allies. You have ever been a generous foe, and you will, I know right well, prove faithful friends. The gracious Maharana Raj Singh has promised me, through the mouth of his valiant son, his support in an enterprise that will, if it be successful, as with your help it must be, put an end to useless wars of fanaticism. Thakurs, doubtless the Prince has told you that our enterprise is nothing less than the dethroning of Alamgir even as he dethroned Shah Jahan. Much evil has he wrought in Hindustan, and not least against his own kith and kin. He cannot complain at retaliation. Methinks, in his old age, he is endeavouring to reconcile himself with Allah the All-Merciful by showing himself a zealous Muslim. He tries, by warring against the infidel, to earn merit and if possible so to occupy his mind as to blot out the memories of past evil actions. Hypocrite in all else, in religion he is sincere. But his fanaticism is running the empire. Not by intolerance can peoples of varied race and faith be ruled. Therefore, before it be too late, and the empire be shattered to pieces in this senseless fashion, another must take his place. High rank and honour shall be yours at Delhi when I am seated on the Peacock Throne. That I and my aims are in earnest and will always show good faith towards you, I most solemnly swear. May Allah be my witness that I speak truth.'

Durgadas, on a sign from Bhim Singh that he waived his precedence, and wished him to be their spokesman, then replied

'Sultan, not for high rank and honour at the imperial Court do we welcome this enterprise, but for the sake of

our distracted country and our little Prince Ajit, whose father's memory we all hold in honour. Have no fear, we shall do our best for your cause, more faithful allies you will not find anywhere in the world. Now, I pray you, divulge to us your plans, for, the sooner we strike, the greater our chances of success. Alamgir must receive no warning of his impending danger.'

'Thakur,' answered Akbar eagerly, 'I thank you from my heart for your words. Of Rajput faith I need no assurance. Briefly then my plan is this. Together we march on Ajmer, wherein the Emperor is but poorly guarded by a few thousand of his body-guard. My brothers, as you know, are many marches distant and cannot reach him in time, even if they are willing. If they refuse to join me, we must together overwhelm them. It may be that much hard fighting lies before us, but that is the spice of life to a Rajput. Never is he daunted by such a prospect. To-morrow we shall strike camp and set forth. May Allah be our shield!'

'Sultan,' broke in one of the amirs, 'it were well to consult the auspices. Let the Najumi be called to fix the time of our departure. On such an enterprise the men will not stir if the omens are inauspicious.'

Durgadas' face showed clearly that this was a most unwelcome suggestion. The Rajput has little use for astrologers and omens when once his mind is set upon an object. But Bhim Singh, who had rapidly formed a design of secretly bribing the fellow if he could, nodded to Durgadas as a sign not to be afraid of this new complication, and said, 'Be it so, but let the Najumi do his business quickly.'

After a brief whispered colloquy with the Sultan, the amir who had made the suggestion arose and left the

tent Meanwhile, the Sultan clapped his hands and soon his servants appeared bearing cups of cooling sherbet They drank success to their enterprise The Rajputs would have preferred to do this in some stronger drink, but intoxicating liquors are forbidden to the Muslim by the law of his religion

The amir returned to announce that the astrologer would consult his chart of the heavenly signs within a few minutes in the open space before the Sultan's tent Bhim Singh was surprised He never thought the Muslims, usually so dilatory, would act so quickly The cups were refilled and drained in silence Then, with the Sultan leading the way, they all emerged from the tent, into the bright sunlight outside

On all sides the Muslim soldiery stood watching with interest a little old man bending over his great chart spread out on a camp-table set in the open space The amir had, of necessity, divulged to him the exact nature of the enterprise for the beginning of which he was to forecast the lucky day Prince Bhim hoped for the best his plan of bribery, which he had so unreflectingly formed, had had no chance of being put into operation Durgadas and his brother were obviously uneasy Soning remarked that he did not like the cunning looks of the old man as every now and then he cast up his eyes to heaven apparently engaged in making abstruse calculations 'Brother,' he whispered, 'a dagger in his heart will be our best omen.'

This whispering, when all else was dead silence around him, did not escape the notice of the astute astrologer He knew that Rajputs were not such believers in his art as other Hindus He also realised that his pronouncements would not be welcome to them, for he had formed

a plan of running off and warning the Emperor, and was going to give himself a day's start in order to do this Fortune had not smiled upon him in Akbar's camp More than once his prophecies had gone awry and he had had much trouble in explaining away their ill success He must seek a new field for the exercise of his art

Suddenly, lifting his head from the contemplation of his chart, he spoke in a high squeaky voice, 'Sultan, to-morrow's sun must set before you start The conjunction of the planets forbids your leaving this camp before sunrise of the second day from now I have spoken.'

Durgadas was about to argue with Sultan Akbar that even a day's delay was hazardous, when Bhim Singh, noticing the impression that the old man had made upon the soldiers around them, plucked his sleeve and whispered 'That amir spoke the truth, these men are intensely superstitious, we could never get them to move to-morrow After all, a day's delay is no great matter I must admit that the amir's suggestion was quite unexpected I learnt at Delhi that Aurangzeb had driven away all the Hindu astrologers who flourished in his father's Court, but I did not know that the Muslims themselves have men expert in star-gazing'

Durgadas shook his head but said nothing He determined to catch the old man if he could and keep him in safe custody, for he had an instinctive feeling that he had had some secret motive in thus delaying them He could not explain it to the Prince, for he had no reasons beyond an inveterate suspicion of all astrologers and magic-mongers, and this suspicion he knew was rather peculiar to himself Once before he had been betrayed by a chaulatan in this art But he knew that to argue

from one solitary example, and that too of a man afterwards clearly proved to be a fraud, would convince nobody. So he kept his counsel.

With many protestations of mutual regard and fidelity the Rajputs parted from Akbar and his amirs, saying that they would rejoin them with thirty thousand men on the appointed day soon after sunrise.

Without saying anything to the Prince about it, Durgadas sent out a squadron to intercept any Muslim who might be trying to steal away to Ajmer to betray their designs to the Emperor. Unfortunately the night was dark, and the astrologer, of whom Durgadas was especially suspicious, managed to slip through on a swift camel. Three others, however, were encountered. On being challenged they had made no answer, but drawing their swords fought desperately to cut their way through. All three were killed.

The next day was spent in preparation for their northward march. On the day after, soon after sunrise, the combined forces were set in motion, in all about sixty thousand men, horse and foot. Durgadas made it his first care to find out whether the astrologer was with the Muslims. Perhaps he had wronged the old man in suspecting him of treachery. Consequently, soon after the start, Durgadas approached Tahawwar Khan with the request that the astrologer be summoned in order to repeat his augury to the Rahtors.

The old man was nowhere to be found. When this news was brought to the Sultan his face betrayed consternation. He was naturally annoyed and feared he knew not what. Unluckily for him he had not that command over his facial expressions that his father had, being by nature open and honest. Durgadas was

watching him like a lynx, and immediately jumped to the conclusion that Akbar was playing some double game and had connived at the astrologer's disappearance. Events were to show him soon enough that he misread the Sultan's character. Nobly and generously did he then strive to make amends for his mistake.

At present, however, Durgulak was on his guard. He told his suspicions to his brother and all the other leaders except Bhim Singh, whom he now considered to be too much infatuated with Akbar to believe aught against him. They determined to be on the constant watch against treachery; of direct attack in the open they had no fear, for they were equal in numbers to the Mughals.

Meanwhile the astrologer was thanking his stars for leading him safely past those lying in wait for him. He gloried in his mind over the rich rewards that Aurangzeb would give him. His camel bore him swiftly, but in the darkness he rather lost his direction. Late the next morning the old man descried the sluggish Lam, and knew that his best plan was to follow its course towards Pushgar, whence it would be easy for him to find the Vale of Ajmer, or, as he preferred to call it, Daru-l-Khair. Pushing onwards for many hours, at last he caught sight of the massive square fortified palace built by the Emperor Akbar on a commanding hill to the north of the town lying at its base. The rays of the setting sun tinted its towers and walls with a rosy flush. Doubting if his tired camel could bear him up the steep, he determined to make enquiries as to whether the Emperor was there.

He learned that the Emperor was at the Daulat Bagh on the embankment of the grand lake, the Bisal Talab. In the imperial residence of marble built by Jahangir,

the Emperor was at this moment enjoying the cool breezes from the lake Thither the astrologer made his way, and after much perseverance persuaded the guards to conduct him to the Presence

His anticipations of rich reward were amply fulfilled Aurangzeb was generous to the man who had tried his best to save his throne—nay, perhaps even his life For the Emperor instantly realised his perilous situation He had been in many tight corners in his life ; this was likely to prove the tightest of all But he did not despair or show any outward marks of fear He rather enjoyed his peril, for his escape from it—and escape he felt assured of in his complacent self-confidence—would prove once again to the world his astuteness and deter foolish men from further attempts against him

An urgent despatch was sent to his sons at Ranthambur, but he had little hope of its reaching them in time He must rely on his wits Calmly and deliberately he sat down to compose a letter to Akbar Entrusting this to a confidential servant, he told him to seek out the tent of Durgadas and secretly leave it there He felt quite confident that the rash, impulsive Rajputs would fall into the trap, feeling that as Akbar was so ready, apparently at all events, to deceive his own father he might well be deceiving them

There were brief moments, however, when even his self-confidence was shaken moments in which he thought of Durgadas, the foe he most dreaded Perhaps Durgadas had been bewitched by the pleasant frank manners of Akbar, whose nature was so near akin to that of the Rajputs He knew Durgadas to be sagacious, and prudent above the ordinary, he knew that his word carried weight with his fellow-chieftains Summoning

a servant, Aurangzeb ordered him to bring the black box in which he kept the pictures drawn at his command of two of the most mortal foes to his repose, Sivaji and Durga. Taking out the portraits, or rather the rude caricatures, from their receptacle he gazed intently upon them. Sivaji was drawn seated on a couch; Durga was depicted on horseback toasting barley-cakes, with the point of his lance, on a fire of maize-stalks. His brow grew black as he gazed upon these two, and he muttered to himself 'This dog Durga was surely born to be my bane.'

He shook off his momentary but depressing fear. He ordered his body-guard to man the walls of the fort, to which he forthwith retired with the ladies of his zenana. His pretext was that they would find it cooler on the hill-top.

His spy did his work only too well. Passing that night through Akbar's camp, now not many miles from Ajmer, he found his way, with considerable difficulty, to Durgadas' tent, the scene a few hours previously of an important council of war attended by Akbar and his amirs. Into the tent he pushed the letter below the canvas wall, and as ill-fate would have it he chanced to hit upon the very place where Akbar had been sitting a short while before.

The spy was all but caught. He did not know it, but Durgadas was not in the tent. As he was in the act of withdrawing his hand from beneath the canvas, a heavy tread approached. Squirming his body round, he just avoided tripping up the Thakur returning from his brother's tent.

By the dim glimmer of a lighted wick floating in oil in an earthen lamp, Durgadas' eye chanced to catch

sight of something white. Stooping, he picked it up. 'Strange, the Emperor's seal, a letter to Akbar—how comes it here in my tent?' he muttered to himself as he laid it upon the carpet and brought the light nearer. 'Ah! I have it, that was where Akbar sat, he must have dropped it inadvertently. 'Tis very suspicious. I had better open it and read.'

So saying, he broke the seal and spread the document flat upon the carpet to get the light upon it. Sitting down he perused it, clenching his fists and biting his moustache as he did so. Now he knew for certain that Akbar had all the while been playing false. The letter was indubitable proof of his treachery.

He ran to his brother's tent, awoke him, and brought him back to his own. 'Listen,' he said, 'to the proof of the Sultan's despicable duplicity. I shall read you Aurangzeb's letter.'

'Be it known to Sultan Muhammad Akbar by these presents

'The attainment of our important designs and high objects appeared to us impossible to realise by any other plan than that adopted by him. Such wonderful luck as to have all hostile leaders brought together in one place was perfectly impossible. Hurrah, a thousand hurrahs, for the ability of the son who has tamed these savages who had escaped the net and has made them obedient to himself. As they have entangled themselves in the net, to-morrow morning, if Allah wills, as soon as the sun rises, our son on that side and our victorious army on this side—strong reinforcements have reached us from Delhi—will close in round them as on the centre of a circle and attack them. It is necessary that our son should exert himself to the utmost so that not one

of them may escape and not a trace of this rebel rabble may remain'

'Ha!' shouted Soning in fury, 'the satchhor! despicable gunchhor! thinking to entrap us thus! Up, Durga! let us summon our comrades and hear what they advise us to do to this traitorous abandoner of virtue'

Soon the tent was filled with the leaders. The letter was read out to them, the seal was carefully scrutinised. There could no longer be any doubt in their minds. Bhim Singh protested it must be a base trick of the Emperor's, let them summon Akbar, he could surely explain. It was impossible he could be so vile—never for a moment would the Prince believe it. He implored his companions not to throw away this golden opportunity of overcoming Aurangzeb and making an end of his tyranny. With his life he would answer for Akbar's good faith.

The others paid little heed to his protestations. They told him he was infatuated and had better not gamble away his life so recklessly as to stand surety for one whose treachery was proved up to the hilt. Even at that moment the Emperor would be marching upon them. Who knew how many new troops he was bringing? Away, they must away without letting Akbar have any inkling as to their movements.

The Prince endeavoured to convince Durgadas that he was cruelly maligning a man of upright character and sterling honesty. He could not succeed. Durgadas had not forgotten the Sultan's consternation at the absence of the astrologer. Akbar's face had betrayed a momentary spasm of fear. This, as Durgadas was forced by subsequent events to acknowledge, had been misconstrued by him as fear that a traitorous design had been

discovered, whereas it had really been fear that the astrologer had slipped away with the news to Aurangzeb and that his ambitious schemes might somehow be brought to naught by the wily old Emperor. The fear had passed because the slow-witted Akbar could see no means save that of precipitate flight whereby his father could save himself. He had urged speed, and wanted to go ahead with their strong force of cavalry, leaving the infantry to follow as fast as they could. This urgency on Akbar's part had served but to confirm Durgadas' ill-founded suspicion that they were being led into some trap consequently his reply had been that they were moving fast enough and had better keep together. Later on, when his error of judgment was made plain, Durgadas realised with a bitter pang how unreflectingly he, a man noted for sagacity, had jumped to a rash conclusion.

Silently and speedily the Rahtors saddled their horses, evacuated their bivouac and rode away into the darkness until they had put twenty miles between them and their supposed betrayer. Bhim Singh wrung his hands in despair at their folly. He could not stay these hasty unreflecting allies though he tried his utmost to do so throughout that night. It was one of the bitterest moments of his life.

CHAPTER XVIII

RAJPUT HONOUR RETRIEVED

WHEN Akbar awoke next morning and heard the astounding news that the Rajput camp was empty, and his allies gone during the hours of darkness none knew whither, he was mightily perturbed. 'What!' he exclaimed to Tahawwar Khan who had brought the tidings, 'incredible! Do you not remember Durga's words, "more faithful allies you will not find anywhere in the world"?' And Bhim Singh, too! Alas for fidelity that is dissolved like mist before the sun! Verily, they must have been bewitched. Go now and assemble the men. We must act immediately.'

Issuing a short while afterwards from his tent, the Sultan found his troopers and foot-soldiers formed up in a hollow square. He advanced to the centre with his officers and thus addressed his men. 'Alas, that we have lived to see the day when Rajput faith is so short-lived! Men, I can find no cause for this incredible action other than witchcraft. Our enterprise is ended in failure. Go ye to your homes or to serve under some more fortunate commander. My bolt is shot. My cause is lost. I have no more arrows in my quiver.'

There was much consternation among the troops and confused murmurings. They were bewildered and knew not what to do. Most were inclined to take the Sultan

at his word and depart homewards, having had enough of these distant campaigns. Tahawwar Khan made up his mind to withdraw with his squadrons and rejoin the Emperor, hoping to convince him that so he had always intended to do when the fitting opportunity arose. To support his assertions he would write a letter to that effect, taking care to put an earlier date upon it. This letter he would give to a faithful body-servant, instructing him, before he reached the Emperor, to tear his clothes to shreds as evidence that he had been waylaid by Mina robbers from the mountains, and had barely escaped with his life with his master's letter in his turban. Taking farewell of the Sultan, who had already told him that he would seek sanctuary with the Rahtors to convince them that he was no traitor if, indeed, it was treachery they feared, Tahawwar Khan departed with his men. His example was followed by the other amirs.

There remained to Akbar barely a thousand men. They were men of his own body-guard who refused to leave him and swore they would follow him to the last gasp. The Sultan was touched at this proof of devotion and was moved almost to tears.

Sadly retracing the way he had come full of high hope so short a time before, Sultan Akbar with his family and his loyal body-guard sought out the Rajputs, hoping that they too had ridden back by the same route.

Towards the end of the day he found them and, riding into their bivouac, appealed to Durgadas and his comrades to give him and his family hospitality and protection. He could not understand what had happened. If they feared treachery on his part he could assure them that his conscience was clear. He was no traitor, as his returning to them made manifest. He was curious to

know what had bewitched them, for he was convinced that they would not have left him in the lurch without some apparently reasonable grounds

'Sultan,' exclaimed Durgadas, whose face expressed contrition, 'you are right. Naught but witchcraft could have made us act so foolishly, so impulsively. Now we know for a certainty that the wily old fox your father has tricked us. Forgive us for imputing treachery to you, but indeed we had some cause to think it after reading your father's letter to you.'

'My father's letter to me?' replied the Sultan in amazement. 'I do not understand. My father has not written to me these many weeks past.'

'Ha!' shouted Bhun Singh in triumph. 'What did I tell you? Was I too reckless a gambler to stake my life on his honesty? It was a cunning trick of the Emperor's to have a letter dropped by some spy in your tent, Durgadas.'

These words rejoiced the heart of Akbar. He was overjoyed to find that his friend had never doubted him. He expressed his gratitude to the Prince in a voice that could hardly speak for emotion.

On being shown the letter, the Sultan acknowledged that, on the face of it, it was damning evidence against him. He expressed his regret that he had not been called upon that same hour to explain matters. His father had been more than a match for him. 'Alas,' he cried, 'we are the slaves of fate, puppets that dance as it pulls the strings.'

Durgadas' handsome face showed plainly to all his feelings of sincere regret and sorrow at the calamity their recklessness had brought upon Akbar. He seized the Sultan's right hand and swore that he would make

amends even at the cost of his life. He begged Akbar to consider himself and his family honoured guests of Marwar, every clan in which would give them hospitality and protection so long as they remained in Rajasthan. Perhaps fortune's tide would turn, they might yet get their chance of seating him on the Peacock Throne.

Akbar smiled a sad smile and slowly shook his head. 'Nay,' he replied, 'it can never be. My day is over. I do not blame you and your brother chieftains, Durgadas, for believing that I was about to betray you. Your letter was too clever. I might have known that nothing disturbs the equanimity or self-possession of Alamgir: no danger catches him asleep. Rightly does he boast of his astuteness. Therefore all thoughts of thrones I now renounce. My first and last desire is to escape his vengeance. I must put the wide seas between me and my embittered father. Thus alone shall I escape his long arm.'

The chiefs listened to this sad speech in dejection. They cursed their folly. Durgadas said that if such were Akbar's fixed determination he himself with a thousand swords would shield him from his father's wrath and convey him and his family safe to Surat, whence they might take ship to Persia. He suggested that they should now take a long night's rest in view of the hard journey before them.

Next morning Prince Bhim departed with the Sesodia clans after a tender leave-taking of his friend the Sultan. The Prince had received bad news of his father's health and must hasten back to Ghanerao. His father, he knew, would be very much grieved at the failure of their most promising enterprise, but, he added, it was no use dwelling upon the past. He assured Akbar that never

again would the Rajputs desert him. Wishing him a safe journey to the coast and a prosperous voyage and all happiness in his new home, the Prince rode away.

Whilst all these events were happening, the Emperor was stirred into activity. His two sons had by this time almost reached him from Ranthambor. He had had a few uneasy moments until he learnt that they were not accomplices in Akbar's rebellion but were really coming to his rescue. His wrath was kindled against Akbar. He was determined to take him alive and put him to a lingering death in Gwalior fort. Therefore he instructed his sons, Muazzam and Azam, to pursue the rebel and bring him back. The war against the Rana would be suspended, for all their energies must be bent upon the one object of capturing Akbar. He would never feel secure so long as that renegade was at large.

These sentiments were soon communicated to his amirs and other officers. Tahawwar Khan's trick had not deceived the astute monarch, who preferred not to employ him any further in his service. Too late that unlucky man realised his folly in hoping to hoodwink Aurangzeb. But, before he was cast into prison, there to be one morning summarily executed, Tahawwar Khan, as a parting act of vengeance against the Emperor, managed to convey intelligence to Akbar of his father's intentions, and urged him to flee as fast as he could before the gathering storm.

When Durgadas learnt that the whole force of the Emperor was about to descend upon them and that the Rana of Mewar was a dying man no longer able to give them effective aid in this crisis, the indomitable Rahtor leader determined to rely upon his own efforts. Leaving his brother Soning in charge of the affairs of

Marwar, he and his thousand retainers hurried Akbar and his men along in headlong flight to the coast. The journey was long and full of peril. They would have to elude the vigilance of the Emperor's navahs in his province of Malwa. They would need to use all their cunning and knowledge of their own country to throw off the pursuers already hot upon their tracks.

With this object, Durgadas led his little force in a south-westerly direction as if he were seeking the western deserts of Marwar wherein large armies would find it difficult to maintain themselves. His plan succeeded. The Mughals followed him but, misled by false reports, imagined him to be making for Jalor, not discovering until too late how he had tricked them by turning south-east and taking his guest through the hilly tracts of Mewar and Dungarpur and so down into Malwa.

The Emperor had even attempted the crude device of bribery. Forty thousand gold 'suns' were delivered to Durgadas one morning by two messengers sent on swift camels in hot haste after him. They reached him before he turned aside into Mewar. This enormous sum was handed to him without stipulations, but he understood clearly the motive with which it was sent. His first impulse had been to spurn the bribe, but on second thoughts he took it, giving the messengers to understand that he would do what the Emperor seemed to wish. When they departed he laughed aloud and, calling Akbar to his tent, spread the coins out before him.

'Behold, Sultan, your generous father has sent this sum to alleviate your sufferings,' he exclaimed with a broad grin, 'but I have sent him no thanks. Perhaps you would like to write him an ironical acknowledgment of his benefaction.'

The Sultan understood. He grasped the Rahtor's hand and thanked him warmly for his adroitness in replenishing their coffers when he might in his first anger have thrown the money back at the messengers, who would doubtless have bolted with it to their own enrichment.

At last, after many narrow escapes and much hardship, the party of fugitives, guarded day and night by their faithful escort, safely reached Surat. There they found an English vessel sailing for the Persian Gulf. Embarking thereon with his family, Akbar was conveyed in safety to a port in the Gulf whence he made his way to Persia, and there he died a year before his father breathed his last.

CHAPTER XIX

A TREATY OF PEACE

THE news that had reached Durgadas about the Rana's health was only too true. He was a dying man. Racked with constant attacks of fever, worn out by the anxieties of the last two years and enfeebled by the many severe wounds he had received at the battle of the Berach, Rana Raj Singh was but a pale shadow of his former robust self. Bhim Singh, on his return to Ghanerao, was shocked at the change in his father. The court bard, who was also court physician, could do little to abate the fever or revive his fading energies.

The Prince's account of the fighting at Nadol, of the promising beginning of Akbar's rebellion against his father and of its sad and dramatic eclipse roused the Rana for a time from his lethargy. He had a short respite from his fever and could take an intelligent interest in the most recent turn of affairs. He could not help breathing a sigh of relief when he heard of Aurangzeb's determination to leave the war in Mewar and bend all his energies to the capture of Akbar.

This policy fitted in with the Rana's desire to return to Udaipur and summon his heir, Jai Singh, from the field. Inasmuch as there were no longer any enemies for him to watch, except an isolated garrison at Chitor which could be starved into surrender at any time the

Rajputs chose to surround them, Jai Singh was free to return to the capital to receive his father's last commands. For the Rana knew himself to be approaching his end. Latterly he had been tormented by the dread of civil war breaking out on his death. Bhum Singh had, without a doubt, immensely increased his popularity; he had won his spurs over and over again, whereas his brother had not shown a particularly warlike or adventurous spirit though he had not shirked his duty when it came. Would his chieftains realise, the Rana wondered, that Jai Singh, the heir-apparent, had not had such a free hand to go roaming about in search of hard knocks and adventure as his brother. Feeling within himself, however, that Bhum Singh was, after all, more of a man than his brother, the Rana now wanted to assure himself that he was not ambitious of the *gadi*, he wanted to warn his heir, the son of Rangadevi, his favourite Rani, not to deal injudiciously with his brother out of fear.

With these thoughts constantly occupying his mind, the Rana watched Bhum Singh keenly and soon came to the joyful conclusion that he was quite reconciled to the position of a younger son and had no desire to oust his brother from the throne. Satisfied with his observations, the Rana announced his intention of returning to Udaipur as soon as he had recovered sufficient strength for the journey.

At this juncture, Raja Shyam Singh of Bikaner, an officer in Aurangzeb's army and high in his confidence, paid a visit to Ghanerao. He had been given leave of absence by the Emperor, he said, to visit his estates and thought he would turn aside from his journey to make the acquaintance of the man who had so successfully

discomfited Alamgir. He wished also to renew his acquaintance with Prince Bhim, of whose more recent exploits some tidings had reached him. Further, he might perhaps be of some service in securing favourable terms of peace. The Emperor was too proud to make open overtures, but was, he was convinced, quite prepared to receive favourably any that might come from the Rana.

Rana Raj Singh received him hospitably and proposed that he should accompany them to Udaipur, where they might discuss possible terms of peace at leisure. Accordingly, on an appointed day, the Rana and his clans took leave of Thakur Gopinath and his daughter Premahai and set out across the mountains. They travelled slowly, for the Rana felt the jolting of the palanquin and could not go many miles at a time.

Arrived in his own capital, unfortunately, the Rana fell ill again for a space and Shyam Singh could make no progress in his negotiations. Jai Singh was assiduous in his attentions to the sick man and listened to all that he said. He promised to fulfil his father's wishes to the letter, for, as he said, he had no desire to stir up unnecessary strife. When, at last, the Rana grew a little better and could receive his guest, he could not agree with his views on the situation. With all the petulance of a sick man, he found objections to every proposal put forward. As victor he wished to make the terms so stiff that Shyam Singh, who knew his imperial master's character, was in despair of ever getting the Rana to a more reasonable frame of mind.

All through the rainy season the negotiations dragged on, the Rana being frequently too ill to attend to any business. In the third month the unfortunate ruler

grew rapidly worse and to the genuine sorrow of all his people sank into death. On the funeral pyre, to which Jai Singh applied the lighted torch, were immolated with the magnanimous Maharana his Rani Arundattadevi, Bhim Singh's mother, and Rangadevi, the mother of Jai Singh, together with twelve of their handmaidens. The brothers lamented their deaths, but could not prevent what was universally considered a most honourable sacrifice.

In course of time, Rana Jai Singh erected to his father's memory an elegant mausoleum in white marble from the quarries of Kankroli. The vaulted roof, supported by handsome columns raised on a lofty terrace, o'ertopped all the other cenotaphs in the crowded Mahasati or 'place of great faith' at Ar, a mile or two from the capital, in order that all who came after might know that Rana Raj Singh had done greater deeds for his country than any of his predecessors.

The new Rana was solemnly invested with the insignia of royalty in a full durbar of the chieftains and nobles of Mewar, the Rawat of Salumbar exercising his hereditary right of girding on the Rana's sword with his own hands. Bhim Singh was honoured by a seat close to his brother on the velvet cushion. He felt, however, that his brother's court was no place for him. He wanted a fief of his own and a strong castle to which he could take his bride Ambahka, for, in his own mind, he saw himself already her wedded lord. He would depart immediately and ask the Rani Korumdevi to give her to him. But he was soon to learn the truth of the proverb 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip'. He was to find that winning his bride was to be no mere matter of a formal request for her hand.

On his brother asking him, on the fourth day of the ceremonial durbars, if there were any boon that he craved from the Rana's hand, Bhim Singh replied in full council that he desired to possess the fief of Banera, seeing that he had killed its former owner, the outlaw Goculdas, whose treachery had resulted in the resumption of his estate by his suzerain. The boon was willingly granted. On the following day, therefore, Bhim Singh did homage to his brother and in return was given the Khillat of investiture in token that he was now lord of Banera.

With a light heart the Prince departed the same day accompanied by his retainers. In his pleasant imaginings he saw himself within a short time the happiest husband in all the world. He made great haste across the mountains towards Ghanerao where the Rani of Jodhpur now was, whilst the armies of Aurangzeb, having for the nonce the upper hand of Durgadas and Soning, were roaming at large over her land. It was the presence of the Rani at his castle that had prevented Thakur Gopinath from being present at Jai Singh's investiture.

Jai Singh was glad to see his brother go. He was jealous of his popularity. Freed from that anxiety, he turned his attention to the incomplete negotiations for peace with Aurangzeb's unofficial ambassador. After some further discussions in the council of nobles, the following terms were provisionally accepted by Shyam Singh and later on were ratified by the Emperor. Chitor was to be surrendered. Mosques already erected on the sites of Hindu temples and shrines were to be left intact, but no more such mosques were to be built. The contingents formerly supplied by Mewar should again be sent for service with the Emperor's armies,

but no additional demands should be imposed. His father's throne and country should be restored to Prince Ajit Singh, who was still under the protection of Mewar

Whilst his brother was thus engaged upon these weighty matters of state, Bhim Singh pursued his happy way, busily imagining all the bliss that the future held for him. How different would have been his feelings if he had known that, some time before the death of Rana Raj Singh, Rao Keshi Singh of Bednor, a Pramar ranking amongst the premier nobles of Mewar, had sent by his purohit a gem-encrusted cocoanut to Rani Korundevi, requesting in this symbolic fashion the hand of her ward, Princess Ambalika

CHAPTER XX

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

STILL comparatively a young man about thirty-four years of age, Rao Kesri Singh had had the misfortune to lose his wife. But in the constant mountain warfare of recent days he had caught a glimpse of the Princess at Kumbhalmer, and, falling in love with her beauty, had determined to end his days of widowerhood. He hoped that the fact that he was a Pramari of ancient lineage still in the prime of life and a kinsman of the Ram by his former wife would outweigh the disadvantage of his being a widower. His purohit faithfully delivered this message and expatiated at length upon the Rao's excellences and virtues.

Rani Korumdevi looked with favour upon his suit. She was feeling the burden of her responsibility for Ambalika's safety and welfare growing too heavy for her in these days of trouble when she had so constantly to leave her palace at Jodhpur to take refuge in the mountains. A stronger arm than hers, she felt, was now needed for the protection of the girl whom she so tenderly loved. Here was a match that, in view of the unsettled times, was eminently suitable. So she accepted the cocoanut on behalf of her ward and sent a gracious reply to Rao Kesri Singh.

The Rani regretted, however, in her letter to the Rao,

that the wedding could not be celebrated with full pomp and splendour at Jodhpur, but Thakur Gopnath of Ghanerao, a close friend of his, had offered her the hospitality of his castle as her temporary home and he would help her in arranging the marriage on as grand a scale as was possible under the circumstances. Rao Kesri Singh was quite content. He was not a man who set much store upon ceremonial, and moreover he felt that some might raise objections to the marriage of a Princess to a widower. A quiet wedding suited his temper and his condition.

Ambahka, when at last apprised of the Ram's acceptance of the offer, was too much overcome to protest. She thought that the Ram had guessed her secret and would have given her to Bhim Singh, her hero and her bracelet-brother. She did not know, poor girl, that the Sesodias had resolved to exclude themselves from inter-marriage with the Kachhwaha and the Rahtor clans by reason of these clans having given daughters in marriage to the Mughal emperors. It was for this reason that the Ram had not thought of Bhim Singh as a possible husband for her ward. Ambalika's great love for the Ram and a feeling that maidenly duty should make her acquiesce in what the good queen wished to do for her happiness kept her tongue-tied. But she was secretly breaking her heart.

The Rana's death and the obligatory attendance of the Rao at the court for the installation of the new Rana had delayed matters. But now he was free and was hastening to Ghanerao with a splendid retinue. The Ram pushed on preparations for the marriage ceremonies to be duly performed immediately on his arrival.

Rao Kesri Singh had left the court two days before

Bhim Singh on the plea of urgent family affairs. The Prince had courteously escorted him for a short distance out of the city, naturally supposing that he was returning to his estates and having no idea of the Rao's real destination and object. The latter, knowing that Bhim Singh was Ambalika's bracelet-brother and suspecting that, in spite of the ban, the high-spirited young man wished to be her husband, had judged it wiser not to mention his real business to any one at the court nor even to his own men. He would soon be with his great friend, Thakur Gopinath, to be wedded to his beautiful bride. If Bhim Singh was disappointed, he was sorry but, as the Rani had accepted his offer and the Princess had made no demur, the Prince could hardly accuse him of playing a trick upon him.

'O Premabai, what shall I do?' wailed Ambalika as they sat together in the dusk of the evening on the wall of Ghanerao Fort. 'Keshri Singh has sent a message to say that he is coming on the wings of the wind. Oh, that the dear Rani had told me sooner! How can I warn Bhim Singh, my beloved, in time? Do you think that he is indifferent? Nay, nay, I cannot believe it after his noble service to me and his tender vows of undying devotion. How can I get word to him to rescue me from this marriage that the kind Rani has arranged for me? Ah, she does not know how my heart is breaking. She thinks my sadness to be due to grief at leaving her.'

As she poured out her woes in this flow of words, accompanied by tears, the kind-hearted Premabai put her arms around her and comforted her by whispering into her ear, 'Be comforted, dear Ambalika, your hero is also coming on the wings of the wind. As soon as

ever I heard what was about to take place, I sent a swift messenger to the Prince. I had an instinctive feeling that my messenger would not need to ride many miles to Udaipur but would be lucky enough to meet him on his way hither. I knew that as soon as his ceremonial duties at court were over he was sure to start out hither. For he would never find his brother's court congenial. He would not rest happy in the idle life that the peace treaty which the Rana is said to be concluding will bring about. His heart ever yearns for adventure and he would not desert his late allies in Marwar. Of this I was sure. A short hour ago my messenger returned to say that the Prince is but a few miles off, awaiting your commands.

'Beloved, beloved Premabai,' exclaimed the Princess, sobbing for very joy, 'you are the truest friend a girl ever had. All will now be well. But what do you advise? Shall we tell the Rani that I will wed none other?'

'That would be unwise,' replied the sagacious Premabai. 'The Rani could not risk offending the Sesodias by openly disregarding their ban on the marriage of a prince of their clan with a Kachhwaha or with a Rahtor.'

'Oh! I knew not of any such impediment. Why have they put this ban upon themselves? Now I see why the dear Rani never thought of my bracelet-brother as a husband for me.'

Premabai, who had long realised that this ban on intermarriage would prevent Bham Singh thinking of herself as his bride, or indeed of any other maiden of these two clans with whom he was not desperately in love, replied, 'Well, Ambika, you must know now that the Sesodias have never contaminated their blood by giving their daughters in marriage to the Mughal,

whereas our clans have done so Hence the ban And now if Bhim Singh appears and openly stands as a rival claimant for your hand, the Rani will be in a serious dilemma, for she loves you truly and would not willingly go against your heart's wish But she cannot, as I told you before, afford to make enemies of her allies, even if, as seems likely, they withdraw from the fight We must, however, credit them with the intention of making their peace treaty benefit Marwar otherwise their action would be base desertion of the Rajput cause But the Rani, remember, is yet in ignorance of the terms of the treaty and cannot afford to risk their enmity Do not blame her So you see we cannot tell her what your wishes are, but must help ourselves'

'What a wise head you have, my dearest friend, upon your young shoulders!' replied Ambalika after this long explanation 'But now, there's no time to lose—tell me what you propose'

'Briefly then,' answered the Thakur's daughter, 'what I propose is this Bhim Singh, as many another chieftain has done in our annals, must swoop down and carry you off before the marriage tie is made indissoluble You must request the Rani's leave on your wedding morn to go to the hill-temple, to pray for your future happiness Your prayers, I know, dear, will be the most earnest ones you ever prayed. As you are returning in your palki, if you peep out through the curtains, you will see your hero You must jump out and he will raise you to his saddle Away you will ride faster than the whirlwind to some strong castle. There the purohit will wed you to your beloved Ceremony will be cast aside—but what are long dull ceremonies to ardent lovers?'

Ambalika's eyes glistened with joy as she listened to her friend. Then a feeling of fearful regret took possession of her. She thought of the Ram's vexation at the insult offered to the worthy man of her choice. She shuddered to think of a bloody pursuit and possible revenge overwhelming her beloved one, of herself she had no thought.

In a broken voice she uttered her fears, but Premabai laughed and told her to have no fear. Bhim Singh was no weakling nor chicken-hearted, he was not likely to get the worst of any fight no matter what the odds against him. Besides, she herself would use all her influence with her father to restrain the natural fury of Rao Kesri Singh, his great friend. In time, the Rao, who was a man of good sense, would realise that an unloving wife would be a thorn in his side all his days.

All fell out as had been arranged. On the morning of the day before the night of the full moon, a procession of gaily-decorated palkis was wending its way to a small temple that nestled at the foot of a hill a mile beyond the walls of the Thakur's little town. Ambalika and her maidens were going to pray to the Goddess for her future happiness. The little bride's heart was all a-flutter as she shyly peeped out of her curtains and could see no signs of her hero. She reminded herself, however, that he had received Premabai's letter and had promised to be ready. Probably he was on the other side of the hill, or, hidden among the trees on the top, was even now watching her progress. She dared not put out her hand to wave him a greeting lest the plot should be suspected by any of her bearers or of the palace-attendants walking solemnly with their silver-headed maces on all sides of her.

The time that she was obliged to spend in the temple in sacrifice and prayer seemed ages long. Her heart beat wildly as she re-entered her palki for the return. But her agitation was short lived. Scarcely had her palki got under weigh with its precious freight than she heard confused cries of astonishment, a clatter of horses' hoofs and a scuffling of feet. There at last was her hero on his good steed 'Thunderbolt' by the side of her litter. The mace-bearers had scattered before him and his three companions like leaves before the wind. With a glad cry she jumped out to be swung up by a strong arm to her beloved one's saddle. Away they rode round the hill and out of sight, galloping as for dear life.

The Rani was terribly upset, and knew not what to make of the matter. Rao Kesri Singh was in a fury at the insult Bhim Singh had given him. The mace-bearers were certain that it was the Prince. Unfortunately Bhim Singh had forgotten Premabai's advice to come masked so as to gain time by throwing the outraged bridegroom into uncertainty as to who had done the deed. Now the Rao of Bednor was for instant pursuit and recapture of his bride.

Thakur Gopinath, however, brought him, not without difficulty indeed, to see that pursuit was vain. They had not the slightest idea in what direction the fugitives had gone, nor were they likely to gain reliable information from any of the peasants, who had probably been well bribed by the Prince to throw pursuers off the scent. The Prince by disregarding the ban would suffer the displeasure of all his kinsmen. Moreover it looked like a concerted plot between Ambalika and Bhim Singh, for Ambalika had been strangely urgent to visit that

little temple outside the walls instead of the big temple in the town. She had, he remembered, finally persuaded the Ram that she was too shy to go in procession through the streets before she was actually obliged to do so. Therefore, as his daughter Premabai had but recently remarked on hearing with great astonishment of this event, let the Rao remember that an unloving wife was an ill thing to live with.

At this moment Premabai entered to tell her father that the rude captors of her dear friend had last been seen galloping round the foot of the temple-hill and must have made for the mountains, for otherwise they would have kept in view a long time. Should she use her knowledge of woodcraft and tracking to find out what path they had taken?

Her kind thought touched the Rao's heart. 'Like father, like daughter,' he thought, little suspecting the part she was playing, as he looked at her straight lithe form and her fine face with more attention than he had previously given to her. After all, he reflected, this mountain nymph, this girl of the open air, would be a more suitable wife for him than a zenana-bred, tender and perhaps ignorant girl. He had fallen in love with a pretty face, but beauty often lies skin deep. The Thakur's daughter was right. An unloving wife would prove no blessing. He would cultivate Premabai's acquaintance, but he must make sure of her, for to be twice foiled would make him a veritable laughing-stock.

So he acquiesced in the Thakur's reasoning, sent a comforting message to the Ram and told his friend that they must forget their troubles in hunting. Perhaps, he said with a smile, Premabai would put her knowledge of woodcraft to a more innocent use and show him the lairs

of the wild beasts. The Thakur was rejoiced at this change of mood and replied that he was sure nothing would please his daughter better

During the next few days Thakur Gopinath noted with pleasure the growing interest his friend the Rao was taking in his daughter, whom, indeed, he had known as a child of remarkable self-possession and independence of character. In his younger days the Rao had thought that such a child would grow up into too masterful a character to suit him as a wife. His first wife had been very shy and retiring. The contrast between her ways and the frank open manners of Premabai was very striking. He was fascinated by the charm of her companionableness. She had an uncommon gift of intuition. She anticipated his wishes before he could express them, she answered his questions before they were half-spoken. He had no need to give lengthy explanations to such a ready-witted girl. In fact, he was astonished at the extent of her knowledge and her sagacity in practical affairs until he remembered the manner of her upbringing and her constant association with her father. It was, indeed, a delight to have such a companion. Their fortnight's shikar was passing all too quickly.

Thakur Gopinath kept himself in the background. He knew nothing of his daughter's disappointment in her hopeless love for the Prince. Of late he had been giving serious thought to the question of his daughter's marriage, though he would miss her dreadfully. He wanted Premabai to have a free hand in the matter, he had no wish to impose a bridegroom upon her. He knew that he could trust her discretion. Now, it seemed to him, the right man had come. Surely Premabai must admire his manliness and good sense.

So it turned out Premabai was in truth more and more captivated by these very qualities in Rao Keshi Singh. She seemed to recognise in him many of her father's characteristics, and her admiration for her father had ever been unbounded. She thoroughly enjoyed talking to the Rao on all manner of topics. After all, she began to realise, a man over thirty had more attractive and enduring qualities than a youth hardly out of his teens. Her very unusual upbringing was now exerting its natural influence. Accustomed to daily companionship with her dear father, she felt that she could trust her life and her happiness to a man nearly twice her own age who seemed so delightedly to appreciate her rather unique qualities and disposition. In leaving her father for a husband she would not be stepping into a strange forbidding world but could continue to be herself, continue to express her own personality, and yet be fondly loved and cherished.

At last, Rao Keshi Singh, realising more clearly every day of their pleasant shikar expedition that Premabai would not be likely to reject his suit, spoke to the Thakur and formally requested his daughter's hand. He was very gratified at the pleasure this offer gave to his old friend, who had taken various opportunities of telling him of his daughter's sayings and doings. When her father told her of his joy and pleasure in the Rao's request, Premabai embraced him lovingly and whispered that her heart, too, was full of joy. Thus Rao Keshi Singh, now utterly grateful to Bhim Singh for having snatched away Ambalika, knew that he had indeed won the very queen of women, unselfish, prudent and thoroughly capable.

The Rao's elaborate preparations for a wedding

were, after all, not thrown away Before the time of the next full moon the little town of Ghanerao was *en fête* to celebrate the nuptials of the Rao of Bednor with its Thakur's daughter

On their return to Bednor they discovered that the fief of Banera had a new lord, no other than Bhim Singh himself Their estates lay within easy reach of each other A cordial message of goodwill from the Rao with the announcement of his happy marriage to Premabai was answered by a letter from the Prince in which, after the usual congratulations, he assured Rao Kesri Singh that his new-found happiness in having won such a noble-hearted girl as Premabai to be his wife was clearly the gift of the Gods, who know better than men do what is really for their good The Gods had given to each of them the wife best suited to him Let them return thanks and rejoice

